



99% Chance of Magic

stories of strength & hope
for transgender kids

99% Chance of Magic

*stories of strength and hope
for transgender kids
and other humans*



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Dearest humans and non-humans,

You are about to embark on a journey of liberation and love. The next 200 pages will take you deep into the heart of what it means to be free to be whoever you are, however that turns out to be. While these stories primarily (and unapologetically) feature girls and feminine characters, their struggles are universal across gender, time, and space. All of us, young and old, grew up in a world with difficult rules that we never signed up for. In many ways, this book is both our reckoning and our reclaiming—it is the moment we take back our power and step into the truth of who we already are.

So, are you with us? Amazing! Then let's get started. *This is only the beginning of everything.*

In love and solidarity,

Amy and Abbey

*Kyrie, kyrie, kyrie! We invoke thee,
honored ones, watchers, and protectors,
who are sacred to She who sang the first songs,
guide our work, sisters, and siblings,
let it find the children, may they know
they are loved, they are loved,
They are Love.
Amen.*



A Shapeshifting Spell

written by Misha Lynn Moon & illustrated by Angel Sera

Magick is all about change. It's about seeing how the world is and wanting to make it different, maybe better. Sometimes it's a big change, like searching for aliens in Portugal or turning the lead part of your life into gold. Sometimes it's the small things, like trying on names and imagining you are someone else for a while. But sometimes, just sometimes, your spell is your whole life—like it was for Martha.

Martha was a girl, but no one else saw it. On birthdays, the paint sets and dollhouses and books about girl detectives that she longed for never appeared. Her hair was cut short, dandelion puff soft, and she found herself trapped in jeans or overalls. Other girls gathered together to learn from each other, but Martha was placed with the boys by accident. Still, Martha knew who she was and that one day, someday, she could fully be herself.

One night, after one too many days of being pushed to the ground by boys who knew who she really was, after one too many mornings crying in the wrong restroom, *she cast this spell.*

On a piece of paper, she wrote, "I am a girl, and other people will see me." Below the words, she drew herself as how she really was. Martha had long red hair, cat eye glasses, and



A Shapeshifting Spell

a black dress like her mother once wore on Halloween. And



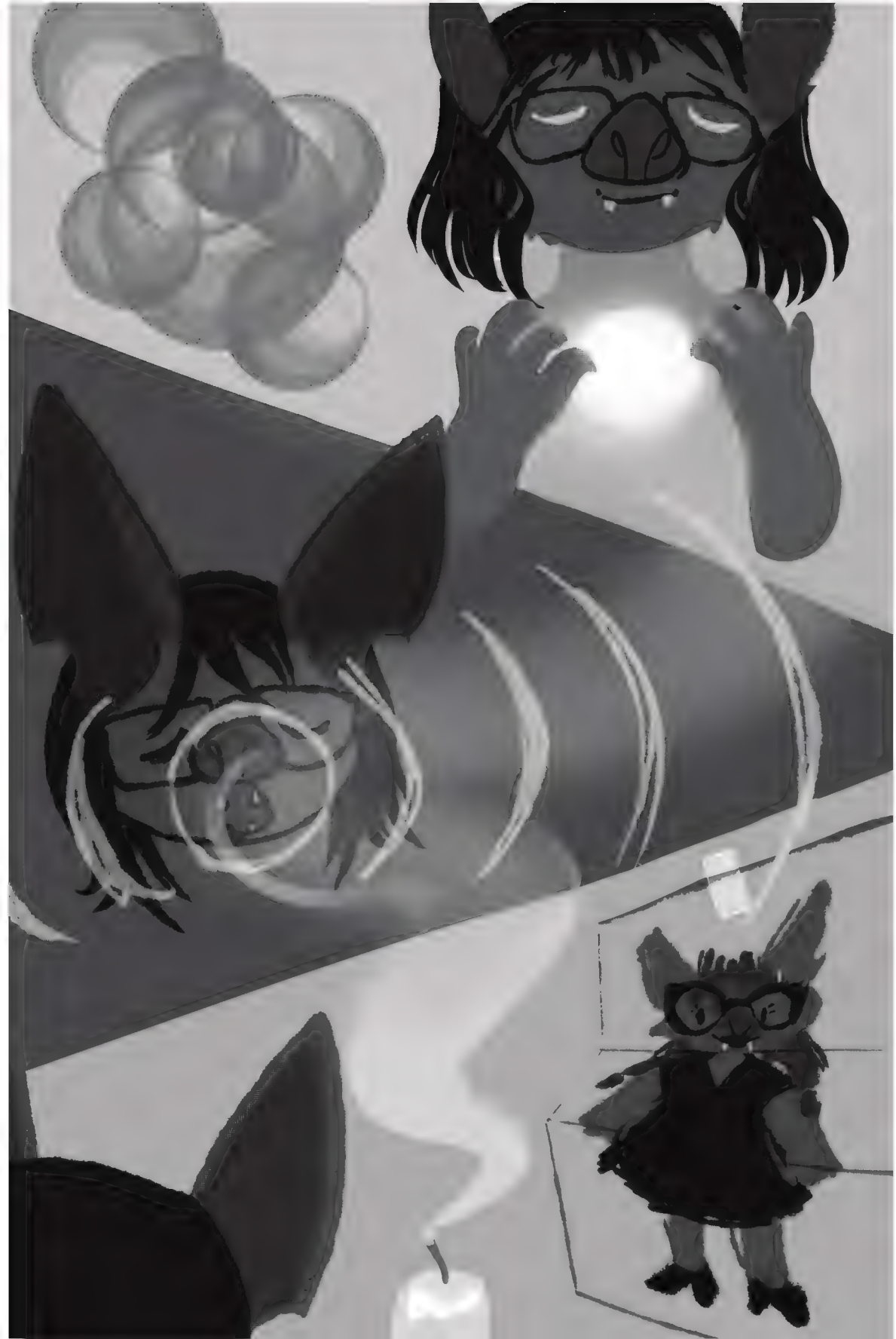
she kept that picture in a special box under her bed, a place where she kept her other secrets: the soft-haired doll she smuggled home from preschool, her favorite picture of Pippi Longstocking, the petals of her grandmother's rosebush—the one that smelled like her mother's neck.

Martha kept that box under her bed for years, *a sacred temple*, a place for her body of light to grow.

There are three magic tricks that all women like us have to do to thrive: build who we are inside as a body of light, cast a circle to find The Others who will help us to be that inner person out here, and to find a way to be happy with the girl that we really are. And that is exactly what Martha did. She built the girl she was inside of her heart, found the other kids who were kind of like her, and trusted teachers and aunts who could help her become more comfortable with herself.

I would love to say that the spell immediately worked, that with a clap of lightning and a puff of smoke Martha was reborn and welcomed in her school hallways, and that her parents immediately put the word “He” into an iron box and threw it in the sea. *But magick has a way of working in its own time.* So until then, Martha found out who was safe and stayed close to them. Sometimes that





A Shapeshifting Spell



would work, and sometimes it would not. Sometimes strangers were cruel, and sometimes friends she knew her whole life would become strangers. As for her parents, she kept trying to show them who she was. Eventually, her mother slowly let her daughter become herself. Her father bumbled, tried, failed, and tried again. Her grandparents never saw her at all. Martha tried to let them go.

And Martha went off to college, met her first girlfriend, and tried on dresses that covered her shoulders and lack of hips completely. She took potions to change her blood and the curves of her body, and learned the secret knowledge of foundation and lipstick. She found her name, buried her dead one, and slowly everyone from before finally got it right more often than not. And eventually, she could always see

the girl she always was. On the best days, it was in her eyes, in her face, and in how others would treat her.

You see, the spell was neither in the drawing nor in the words written in crayon at the top of the page. It wasn't in the mint-flavored pills or in what anyone else said to her. Martha's spell was her will, knowing what she was, and not giving up. That is what makes her a powerful witch. *That is what makes her who she really is.*



99% Chance of Magic

written by Alys S. Brooks & illustrated by Jeanelle Tabaranza

Em turned to a new page in her diary/lab notebook. She sat between her bed and the wall so that her sister, who was at her computer, couldn't see what Em was writing.

I'm a witch, Em wrote in her most cursive-y cursive. She put that sentence on a new page to keep it separate from her observations of the moth she caught last night, the dark blue ink still wet. Em blew on it gently so it wouldn't smudge.



Em had been a witch for a long time, but she only figured it out today. Knowing she was a witch wasn't like knowing she was a girl. She had always known that, even when her mom and dad and brother and sister and grandma and grandpa and best friend and teacher and classmates thought she was a boy. It also wasn't like knowing her dad had eaten a sandwich in every country. Em once thought that was true, but now she knew Dad was joking by the way he smiled when saying it.



Her first probably-witchcraft occurred when she made wilted plants from her science fair experiment healthy again by thinking positive thoughts at them. Em

felt a little guilty for not including her spell in the Method section of her poster, but she felt guiltier for almost letting her plants die of thirst.

Her second probably-witchcraft was after she dropped her calculator and broke its solar panel with an entire pre-algebra assignment to finish. Em laid the calculator on a washcloth and whispered to her desk lamp, asking it to shine extra bright to make up for the broken solar cells. The calculator only made it through twelve problems; but a week later, the cracks were gone.



Em decided to tell her older brother Nile, her older sister Athena, her mom, and her dad about her new career plan at dinner. She hid her diary/lab book in the gap between her mattress and the bed frame, then sat on her bed to see what Athena was up to. Her sister was staring at her computer, a used one their mom had fixed so Athena could do homework and practice graphic design. A black and white photo

with yellow words on top of it was on the screen.

“What are you doing?” Em asked, partly to annoy her sister, partly to hear her explain what she was doing.



“Designing a poster,” her sister said.

“What for?” Em asked.

“Nile’s band.” Sure enough, Em could make out Nile with the bass guitar that used to be their dad’s.

“That’s nice of you.”

Athena shrugged. “I need an example of poster design for my art school portfolio.”

“Oo! Can I see it?” Em persisted. Athena talked about her portfolio at least two and a half times per day, so it must be at least a little interesting. Em reached for the grey binder.

“Don’t touch it!” Athena said. Em yanked her hand away like she had the time she touched the tip of Mom’s soldering iron, thinking it was off.

“Sorry,” Em said.

“Emmy?” her dad called, “Can you help me with dinner?”

She hopped off her bed and passed a bookshelf covered in green, blue, and purple post-it notes keeping track of questions she still didn’t know the answer to. *How many sandwich kinds are there, REALLY?* was scrawled on a yellow post-it that jostled a green post-it bearing *How big are amoebas? (in inches)*.



Em's family was eating in the garden, as Athena insisted they call the small courtyard they shared with the other apartments, even though it wasn't very garden-y. There were flowers, but they were all dandelions, which their neighbors claimed didn't count. That seemed unfair to Em, but she was a witch, not a gardener.

Mom's coworker Mr. Wright was visiting today. His jacket, shoes, slacks, and glasses were all brown, so Em hypothesized that brown was his favorite color. Em looked down at herself and realized her shirt and sneakers were both blue, even though blue was her third favorite color. She formulated a new hypothesis that brown was one of Mr. Wright's favorite colors.

Mr. Wright taught something called geographic information systems, which had to do with maps. Em liked maps, but Mr. Wright somehow made them boring.



Em quickly ate the pasta carbonara. She was semi-okay with asparagus, so she ate that next. A small pile of spinach remained. Mr. Wright noticed.

"Picky eater?" he asked her mom. Em didn't wait for mom to respond.

"I am not a picky eater. I try

everything before I decide that I don't like it."

And that was true, too. One of her most-used notebooks was labeled *Things I Like & Dislike & am Ambivalent About*. She added the last bit after Mom used ambivalent in a sentence. After forgetting how Mom spelled it, she first wrote it as *ambivalant*, but later fixed her mistake with White-Out. The notebook sat on her nightstand next to her magnifying glass, ready for her latest discovery. In it, she scored everything that she had tried out of ten.

Mom smiled at Em. "She's just very exacting."

That sounded good, but Mr. Wright laughed.

"And she loves to experiment," Dad said, giving her hand a squeeze.

"Exacting means you know exactly what you like and don't like," Nile whispered.

"Thanks," Em whispered back. "Why did he laugh?"

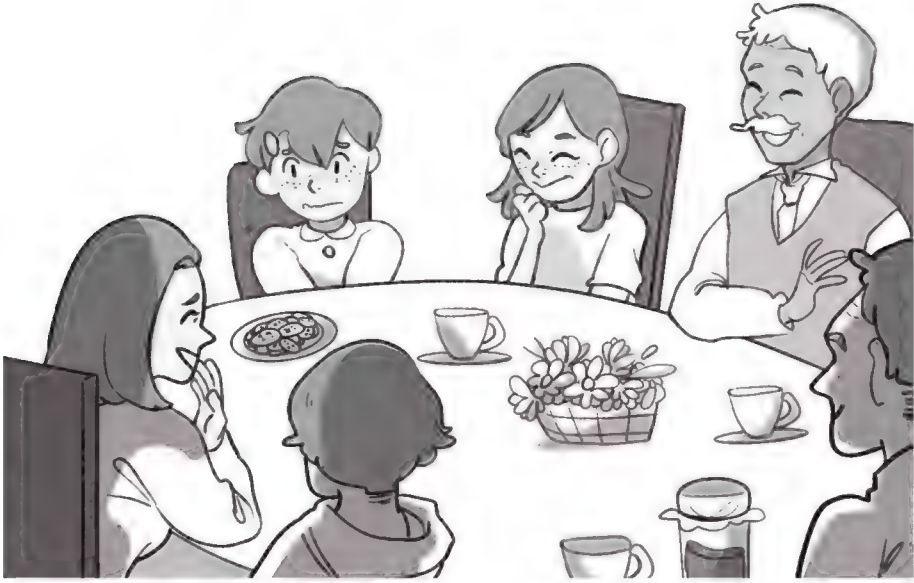
Nile shrugged his grown-ups-are-weird shrug.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Mr. Wright asked.

Oh, he's talking to me. Em stopped thinking about how she could keep the clouds from raining on them.

"A witch," Em said. *Shoot!* She was going to wait until dessert. Dessert is the best time for good news, especially when dessert is mint chocolate cake.

Everyone started laughing except Mom, who was holding back a giggle. Em suddenly felt hot and flushed and horrible



and small.

She wouldn't cry. She would walk away, dignified, while everyone collected themselves. As she stood up, Em knocked over a glass of water and everyone started laughing again. She bolted into the apartment building, ran up the stairs, opened the mercifully unlocked apartment door, and jumped on her bed.

Safely alone, she let herself cry.

“Emmy?” Dad called from the hallway. The first time he used that nickname for her, Em had been crying about having her backpack filled with notes calling her a boy. It always made her feel so good to hear him use her actual name. She was older now, and had already stopped crying ten whole minutes ago, but hearing ‘Emmy’ coming from her Dad still

made her feel better.

“What?” Em asked, muffled by her pillow.

“Are you okay?” Em heard the squeaky noise that always happened when someone stepped on the exact middle of the doorway—she had tested it.

“No.”

“I’m sorry,” Dad replied while sitting on the bed. Em’s face was still in the pillow, but she could feel the bedsprings compress. “I shouldn’t have laughed. It took me by surprise. It just wasn’t the answer I was expecting.”

“What was the answer you were expecting?”

“A *scientist*,” Dad said, putting his hand on her shoulder. “You’re smart and curious. You’d be great at it, but I will support whatever you decide.”

“Including being a witch?”

“Including being a witch.”

Em sniffed and pulled her head out of the pillow.

“I felt awful when everyone laughed.”



Dad looked down at his feet and then back to Em.

"I know."

Em wrapped her arms around Dad, and he wrapped his arm around her.

It was time for dessert by the time Em and Dad came outside again. Mom gave her a long hug before she went inside to get the cake.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Em sat down next to Athena, who put her hand on Em's.

"Sorry, Em."

Nile didn't apologize, but he gave her the first and largest slice of mint chocolate cake—which was actually better.

Em took a bite. She closed her eyes, savoring the chocolate and mint's dance in her mouth. She was about to sink her fork in again when she felt a droplet on her right index finger, right above the freckle that prompted one of her first post-it questions: *Where do freckles come from?*

"Did you feel a drop?" Mom asked.

"Yeah," Nile said.

"Everyone take their plates!" Dad called, grabbing the vase on the table.

Safely inside, Em could see the storm getting worse. She looked over at Dad. He wanted Em to be a witch. *Why not practice now?*

"I think I can stop the rain," Em said.

Mr. Wright started to laugh, But after noticing nobody else was, he pretended he was coughing.

Athena raised an eyebrow.

“What are we waiting for?” Athena asked. “Let’s get our coats on.”



Em felt ridiculous. She generally liked walking in the rain, kept dry by her green raincoat, but now everyone was watching her.

She closed her eyes. She imagined she was cloud size and walked up to one.

“Hey,” Em imagined herself saying to the cloud, “Can you, umm, stop? Just for a bit.”

The cloud said nothing, but she could tell it disagreed. It shook its head, sort of. She tried again.

“Stop, please.”

Lightning flashed faintly inside the cloud.

“Stop!”

With a crack of thunder, the rain came down harder. Her stomach clenched. *What if I can’t make it stop?* she worried.

Em studied the cloud. It had been waiting a long time to rain. It liked to rain. She knew it was hard to stop doing something you had been wanting to do for a long time.



“Sorry,” Em said. “I shouldn’t have asked you to stop.”

Maybe she couldn’t stop it from raining. How do you say goodbye to a cloud? “Umm, happy raining?”

Then the cloud did something else. *Did it say goodbye back?* No, but it gestured... *sort of*.

“You want to move out of the way?” Em asked.

The cloud agreed!

Em jumped twice in excitement. “That would be awesome! Thank you!”

She opened her eyes and watched as the cloud glided away from the garden. It was still raining on them, though, thanks to a second cloud.

She closed her eyes again. She walked up to that cloud and politely asked it to move. It didn’t understand until Em explained that, just like the cloud had wanted to rain, she and her family had wanted to eat cake outside.

A third cloud came to fill the gap left by the other two clouds, but the first cloud elbowed it out of the way with a wink that wasn’t a wink because clouds can’t wink.

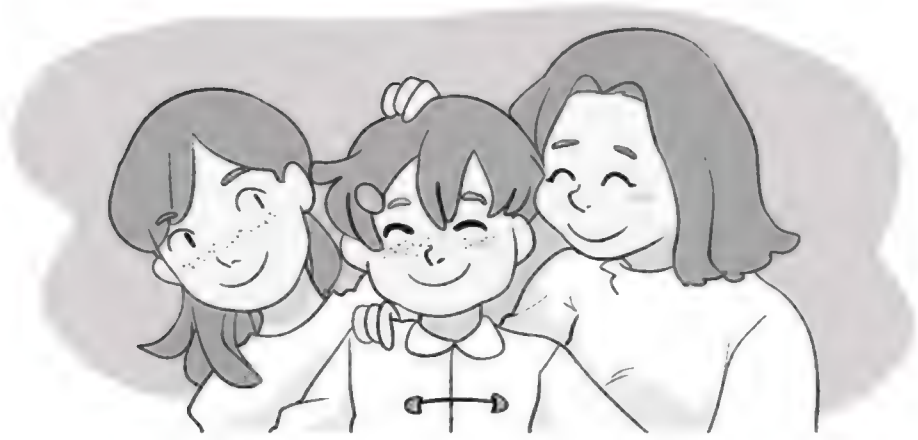
Em opened her eyes. It wasn’t raining on the garden anymore, but it was raining on all three apartment buildings that bordered it.

“I... did it,” she said slowly.

“Nice,” Nile said.

Mom and Dad looked confused, but were smiling.

Athena gave her a side hug. “Good job, Em.”



“That’s my girl,” Dad said.

Mr. Wright came out confused and unsmiling. “What a coincidence,” he said.

Em’s stomach knotted. She was going to argue, but he spoke first.

“I’m sorry for laughing earlier,” he said.

“I accept your apology,” Em said. He was probably scared that Em would turn him into a toad, making it a fake apology, but she didn’t care. She had more important things to do than hold a grudge, like figuring out how to measure amoebas.

Em was lying on her sister’s bed, half-playing Minecraft on Mom’s phone, half-watching her sister finish the poster.

“Um, that was cool of you to stand up for yourself and say you could stop the rain, even though we embarrassed you earlier,” Athena said.

“Thanks,” Em replied.

“I mean it,” Athena said. “It’s hard to do that. I’m proud of you.”

Had Athena ever said that before? Well, she said it when Em had dropped the cookie she had frosted. At the time Em was four and didn’t understand sarcasm at all, but that probably didn’t count.

Athena took a deep breath.

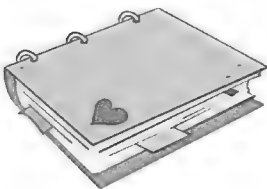
“I have something to show you.” She picked up her portfolio binder. Em beamed.



Athena sat next to Em and opened it. The left page had eight logos and the right had a black and white photo of two flower petals on a window sill. Em didn’t care about logos, but close-ups of plants were pretty and scientifically interesting. Sometimes you could even see the stigma and stamen.

Athena turned the page to a sketch of two girls kissing. It was good. For a moment, Em was in the room with the two pen-and-ink girls, candlelight flickering on their faces.

Athena looked at Em in anticipation. Em wasn’t sure what Athena was expecting until she noticed that the title of the drawing was *Athena and Erika*.



Em wasn’t sure what to say, so she hugged Athena instead.

Then Em remembered something. She

reached into the bottom of her bookshelf and found a post-it note she had been hiding from Athena. She handed it to her sister.

“Why won’t Athena show me her portfolio?” Athena smiled and laughed.

Em grabbed her binder of answered questions and turned to a new page. Athena pressed the post-it note into the corner.

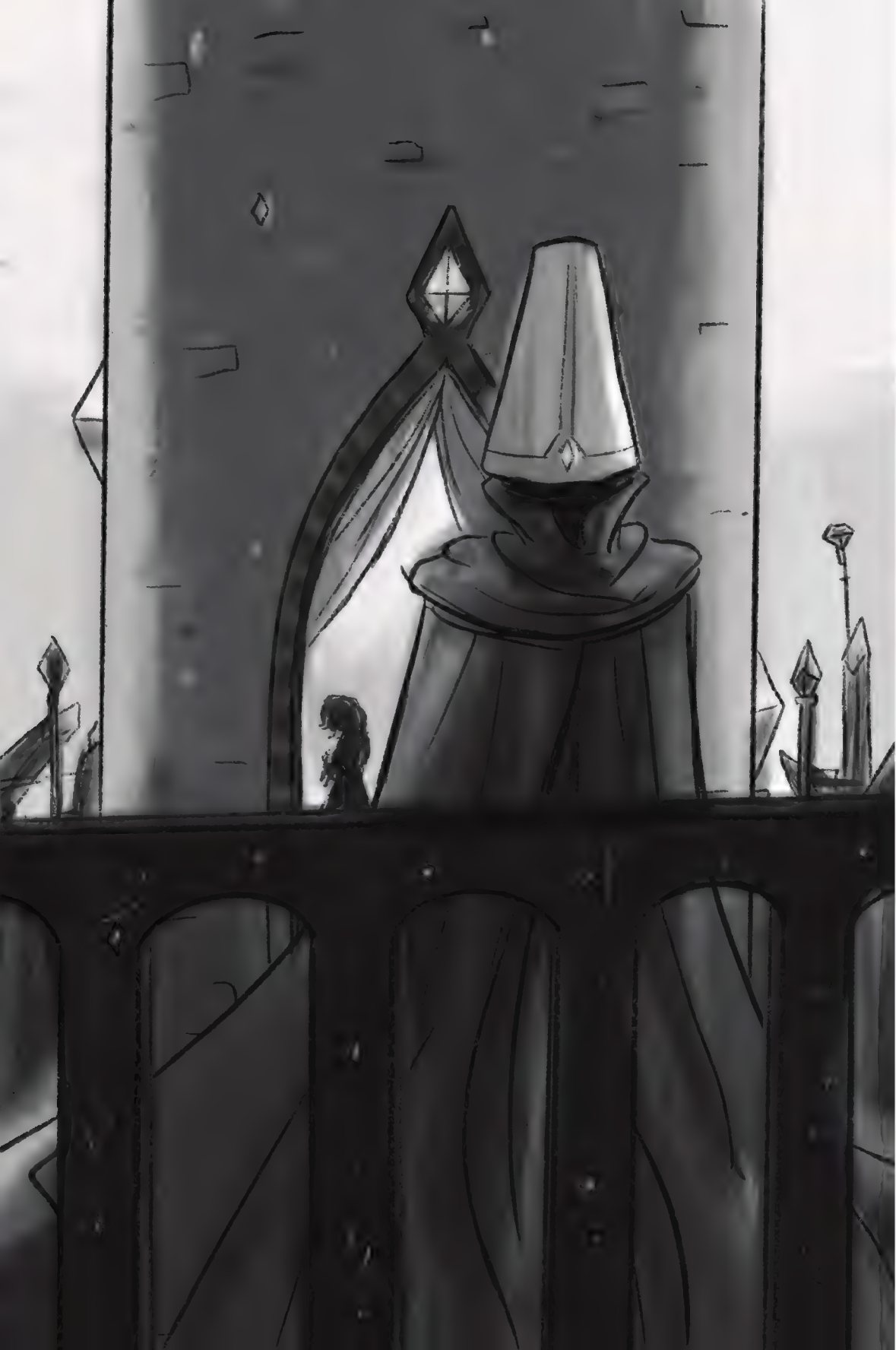
“What should I put down for the answer?” Em asked.

Athena started to twist her ponytail around her finger slowly. She always did that when she was really thinking.

“I know,” Athena said.

She gently tore a page from her sketchbook, a rough pencil drawing of Athena and Erika. Athena held down the drawing while Em taped the note to it with masking tape.





A Rightful Queen

written by Vivien Al-Miqdam & illustrated by Aria Villafranca

Naji changed after his twelfth birthday, and it worried his sister Nadia. She couldn't remember a single day spent apart from him since they were babies, but now he did nothing but hide behind the locked door of his room.

They used to rip around the backyard, speed their bikes down the hills, tag team video game bosses, choreograph dance routines, and do voices for all of the characters in the comic books they loved. Nadia expected Naji to be her constant accomplice. His sullen retreat into silence after refusing the birthday party their parents offered to throw him confused her to no end.



She tried to talk to him when she could catch him, usually at dinner or in the mornings before school, but it felt like he had forgotten how to look up from the floor. It was almost as if he had lost all of their memories and inside jokes, and Naji seemed intent on communicating in mumbled half-sentences and weak grunts.

“Don’t worry. He’s just growing older,” Baba said, “Things will change, and he’ll be back to normal before you know it.”

But Nadia wasn’t so sure.

She decided she needed an expert opinion, and nobody knew more than their weird aunt Fatin. Aunt Fatin lived in Florida and always posted the coolest Instagram shots of herself reading books by the beach, tending plants in beautiful macramé sundresses, and posing with diagrams covered in Arabic letters and numbers. Nadia wasn't sure what Fatin did for work; Baba said she was an amateur scholar of strange things, but that sounded like code for something Nadia wasn't supposed to know about.

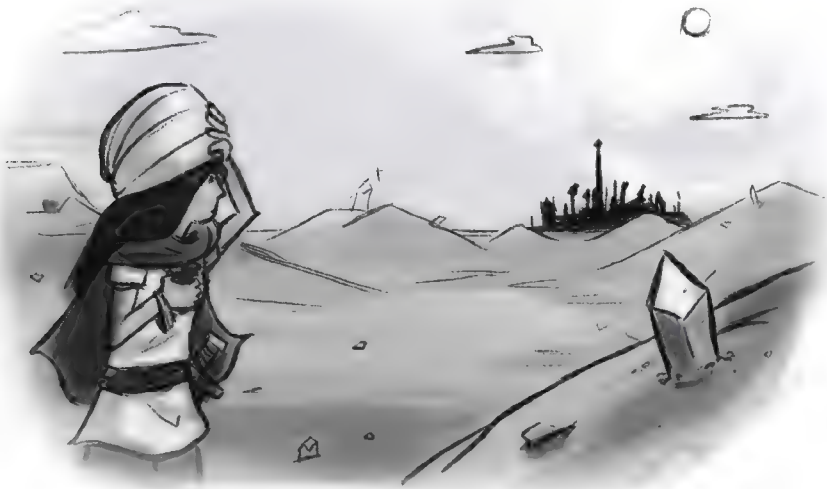
"Are you sure it's not just puberty?" Fatin asked over email. Plenty of Nadia's friends had already gotten their periods, were excited by their puny mustache hairs, or complained about acne. What was happening with Naji felt different.

"If you're certain, Habibti," Fatin replied. "Look out for the mail, I'll send you something to help you find out. Auntie loves you. XOXO"

Exactly forty days later, a package arrived from Florida.



Inside, Nadia found a necklace with a tiny leather bag tied to it and a note which read: "Wear the amulet while both you and your brother are sleeping and focus on helping him as you fall asleep. Your dreams should give you some answers. *Good Luck, Habibti.*"



So, she did just that. Later that night, focusing with all her will, Nadia scrunched up her eyes and yearned for sleep.

Suddenly, she had to shield her face from the hot sun simmering the shining green sand all around her. She stood up, shook the fine sand out of her purple tunic and turban, and checked to see if she was still wearing the amulet—she was! She noticed that a short sword in a brown leather scabbard also jiggled at her left hip.

For a moment she felt lost. A desert stretched out in all directions without a rock or shrub anywhere, and not even a wisp of cloud marred the perfectly clear glass sky. The sun hung at its zenith, trapping Nadia's shadow under her feet. Peering past the viridian dunes and through the mirage lines rippling the searing air, she saw a city of pink crystal glinting like a faint beacon far on the horizon.

No sooner than she decided to set off walking to it, she

arrived, as though the emerald desert folded up beneath her feet to deposit her in front of the towering translucent rose walls. Nadia hadn't felt a whoosh of wind or seen a rush of scenery; she had been in one place and now she was in another, just like that.

She passed through the open gates and found the central thoroughfare leading to an ebony palace, which struck out from the city around it like a dark stem rising from a ripe peach. The thoroughfare was crowded with people: animal people, specifically. There were foxes in doublets, hippos in overstuffed slacks, and pandas in denim vests.

"We! The People! Want the Fall! Of the Vizier! Freedom for the prince!" the clothed beasts chanted in unison. The menagerie was protesting. She tapped a kaftan-wearing owl on the shoulder and asked what everyone was protesting for.

"The vizier has locked up our rightful young king in the tallest tower of the palace and refuses to let him out. He has taken the sultanate for himself, but we remember the day the king's birth was announced, and we refuse to cooperate with this charlatan."

"I'm looking for my brother. He looks like me and is maybe just a little taller. Have you seen him?" Nadia asked.

"No, but if you're looking for someone, then you should ask the vizier. He owns all the eyes in town, or so the rumor goes." At that, the owl pointed with one of his primary feathers at a small hooded figure in blue on a balcony high above



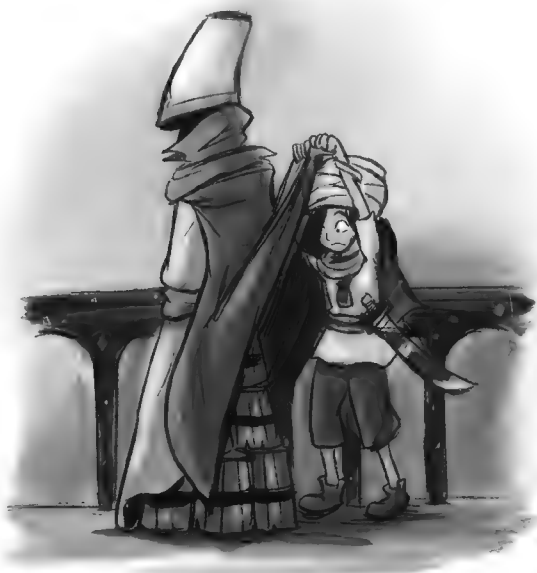
the crowd. For a second, Nadia wondered how she would get up there, but then she realized she was already up there, abruptly transporting her without a notice in the same way that brought her to the city gates.

She stood behind the vizier, watching him glower down at the crowd. Up close, she noticed the periwinkle patterning on his robe. As the fabric rippled in the wind, he almost seemed to meld with the sky, like he wasn't truly there at all.

Then she saw it: he wasn't! Nadia reached down and lifted the hem of the robe to discover a stack of buckets. Unless the buckets could talk, and it didn't seem like they could because they hadn't responded to a little girl looking up their skirt, she would have to find the prince herself and hope he knew something about her brother. She dropped the fabric back

in place, turned her back to the crowd, and proceeded into the palace. The chants from outside faded the deeper into the palace's sturdy halls she ventured.

After wandering for what felt like a very long time through a labyrinth of black corridors and rooms, she came across



a spiral staircase. *This must be the tower*, she assured herself, and began to climb. At the top, she found a locked door—not a wooden castle door or a barred iron door, but a regular door much like she'd find in her own house. In fact, the longer she looked at it, the more the door looked like the one to her brother's room. She knocked, but there was no response.

"If you're not coming out, then I'm coming in!" she yelled, then waited. The silence continued, so she jimmied the door open with her sword and stepped into an opulent bedroom. Brocaded curtains hung in front of palatial windows, jeweled wallpaper wrapped around the room, and glass animal toys littered the floor. Verdant potted plants sat at every turn, and mahogany shelves inset into the walls overflowed with books and bobs and things of all kinds.

Such a beautiful room, Nadia thought. In the center, spread out on top of the satin sheets of the canopied bed, wearing a ruffled, sequined dress that sparkled in a dazzling array of colors, was her brother.

"Naji?" she whispered, hesitantly.

He sat up stiff as a board and stared, eyes



wide in shock, then suddenly started to bawl. Naji balled up his fists and scrunched them into his face as he snorted and wailed, his skirt bunched up like a mushroom cap underneath him. Nadia hopped up onto the bed, threw her arms around him, and hugged him tight until his sobbing ebbed. She then pulled his hands away from his face, and that's when she noticed it. His face looked less like his and more like her own. This was definitely her brother, but maybe he was her sister instead?

"Naji?" she repeated.

"Najwa, not Naji..."

"You're the... princess?"

"Surprise?" Najwa replied with a weak smile.

"So... you're my sister?"

Najwa didn't answer, but she nodded as the tears streamed.

"Why did you lock yourself in your room?"

"Because they're all expecting a prince, a king, and I'm neither of those things. I'll disappoint them all and they'll hate me."

"But it's your kingdom. You're the true princess. It doesn't matter what they think; this is your Sultanate."

"What if I go out there and it all goes wrong? What if I mess it up? People could invade and destroy the kingdom because there's no king to protect it, or all the people could leave, and it'll die from the inside. If I don't go outside, then it will all stay just like this."



Nadia couldn't help but laugh.

"Stop laughing at me," Najwa frowned.

"I'm not, I swear," she reassured her while struggling to stifle her giggles. "It's just... look, all that stuff could happen anyway with you locked in here and that fake vizier pretending to run the place out there. If you come out, no matter what happens, at least you get to be the Queen, for as long as that lasts."

Najwa stopped crying and gazed into empty space, invisible gears turning in her head. She sniffed, wiped her face

with her palm, and let out a sigh with a smile.

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

Nadia held out her hand, and her sister took it. She led the queen out of her room, down the stairwell, and through the halls to the balcony. Just as they were about to cross the threshold into the sunlight, she woke up.

Nadia sat up in bed and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She fingered the pouch on her necklace with one hand, thinking about the interrupted dream. Suddenly, her door burst open and her brother bounded into her room. They stared at each other for a moment, unsure what to say until Nadia decided to break the silence.

“Najwa?” Nadia asked with a grin. Her brother nodded, which meant this wasn’t her brother, not anymore. “Want a hug, sis?”

At that, Najwa leaped into the bed and they hugged for the first time in a long while, in the real world at least.

Things didn’t go back to the way they were; it was dif-

ferent now, after all. Najwa stopped hiding in her room, and Nadia got her sister back without knowing she’d lost her in the first place. Nadia told Najwa all about asking Aunt Fatin for help, which reminded her to call and say thanks.

“Maybe she could help me tell



Baba about all this?” Najwa suggested.

“Maybe, but she’d have to include directions. He’d get lost in the palace and never get to meet the Queen.”

The two sisters snickered, and they laughed their way into the rest of their lives.





The Sisters from the Stars

written by Amy Eleanor Heart & illustrated by Wriply M. Bennet

Once upon a time, in a star system sixty-five quadrillion miles away, there shined a bright and beautiful princess named Hailey.

But Hailey wasn't any ordinary princess. She was a starheart, to be precise. And starhearts looked a lot like human beings—that is to say, if human beings had pink butterfly wings and bold magic wands.

This made Hailey different from anyone she knew, but that didn't matter to her. Hailey loved who she was and everything that she was becoming. But being so different, so unique, came with a cost. She was always lonely—a great loneliness that never seemed to go away.

You see, while Hailey believed everybody she met was beautiful and unique in their own right, she knew deep down the ones she wanted to be with the most were those also struggling to find a place called home. *Girls like her*, she would often tell herself. *Girls like us*.

There was one particular human that Hailey always wanted to talk with at school. She wasn't entirely sure what their name or pronouns were, but there was something distinctly familiar about them.

Perhaps it was the way this human walked. There was a

gentle kindness with every step they took, despite the overwhelming sadness in their eyes. Maybe it was their light green hair that reminded Hailey of her favorite milkshake: super-sprinty, minty-chippy, chocolate chip swirl. It could have also been the daily doodles on their arms that were filled with dragons, swords, and complex magical incantations. Either way, Hailey was mesmerized. Amazed? Perplexed, even. *If she could only find the courage to talk to this human, who knows what would happen?*

So Hailey tried. Day after day, she tried (slowly but surely) to muster up her nerve and finally speak. *This will be it! This will be the day!* she whispered to herself while approaching The Milkshake Human. *I'm going to do it. I'm going to do it right now. I'm going to finally say the most difficult word in this weird human vocabulary: Hello.*

But when her mouth opened, nothing would come out: not a peep, not a squeak, not an anything. Sometimes she would meow, but certainly not loud enough to be heard at all.

I will try again



tomorrow, Hailey confidently explained to nobody. *Maybe tomorrow will finally be the day.*

Tomorrow eventually came, but it took about three months, and the circumstances weren't light. It happened in the hallway between classes. Milkshake was curled up against a locker, sobbing a sea of tears, while a group of boys screamed and shouted slurs at them that Hailey could not even believe were real.

"GET AWAY FROM THEM," Hailey screamed, her wings fully extended across the hallway, her glistening magic wand armed and raised for battle.

The boys stopped their assault on Milkshake, but then pointed their crosshairs onto Hailey instead. The leader of the group lunged towards her, his hand rolling into a giant fist. He was SO mad. His hair was about to catch on fire as sparks flew from the tips of his spikey head.

"And what are you going to do about it, FAIRY?" shouted the boy.

Hailey's face burned bright red. *FAIRY*. Oh, she hated that word. Not that there was anything wrong with being a fairy, mind you—she certainly had the wings for it. But still, a fairy was not who Hailey was. She was a star, first and foremost, always and forever.

Angry words bounced back and forth through Hailey's heart. *I want to teach him a lesson so he'll leave Milkshake alone*, she screamed on the inside. *Why do humans have to be*



so cruel to each other?

Then it dawned on her.

Hailey lifted her magic wand upward. Suddenly, her feet grew ten times their size, her dress expanded, and her entire body bloomed upward, breaking through the ceiling of the school.

She looked down at the bullies. Her eyes glowed bright green.

“EXCUSE ME,” Hailey boomed, flapping her wings vigorously as wooden beams from above came crashing down. **“DID YOU JUST CALL ME A FAIRY?”**

The boys screamed and scattered in every direction. Their leader peed a little in his pants, then ran away at light speed into a nearby hallway.

After the dust settled, Hailey shrunk down to her normal size. She climbed through the rubble and over to Milkshake. Milkshake was frozen, their face locked in a giant grin. They were still in delighted shock at what they just witnessed: *real magic from another child just like them.*

Hailey leaned against the locker next to Milkshake, not-so-casually scooting to the floor. Neither child said a word for five whole minutes. Eventually Milkshake’s face loosened, and their smile faded back into profound sadness.

“I hate that this happens all the time,” Milkshake quietly cried. “I wish people could, or would, see the real me.”

Hailey looked at Milkshake, her own eyes watering. *Not*

being seen was something she understood intimately.

"They're just jealous," she barely squeaked, then half-smirked. "Those silly boys are itching for your beautiful, minty cream hair that's making me crave a big sundae right now. Mmmmmm, chocolate mint swirl...."

Hailey closed her eyes and started to tenderly rub her own belly. Soon after, a river of gold, sparkling slobber emerged from her lips and dripped down her chin.

Milkshake chuckled a little, then wiped some of the tears from their face.

"So, ChocoMint, what's your name?" asked Hailey, still in a daze from her dessert fantasy.

"Ummm," whispered Milkshake. "Well, everybody calls me Victor, but I like to be called Violet."

"Ooooo," Hailey squeed. "Tell me, tell me, is that your favorite flower?"

Violet looked away from Hailey, their cheeks turning bright pink.

"Personally, I love sunflowers



myself,” Hailey jumped up and down in delight. “But oh my gosh—violets are SO pretty. This planet is so full of weird and wonderful things that I can barely contain myself most of the time. What about pronouns? How do you like others to think of you?”

“I like it when people see me as a girl,” shyly spoke the minty-haired child, “and I like it when others refer to me as she.”

Hailey smiled, her wand glowing in joy.

“Well, I will call you whatever makes you feel more like you, Violet,” exclaimed Hailey. “Except I might not want to call you hamburger or potato salad, or something delicious like that. But only because I would be hungry all the time and I don’t really know if I want to eat you.”

Violet stared blankly at Hailey, her eyes double-blinking in bewilderment. “You are weird.”

“I know!” Hailey exclaimed. “Let’s be friends.”

From that day onward, the girls became inseparable. There were slumber parties, spy sessions, mall adventures, and freedom dances. Sometimes they even played with Hailey’s magic wand, temporarily turning themselves into milkshakes, garlic fries, dragons, and bunny rabbits. It was the best of times for both kiddos. Neither child had met somebody their own age who could see their hearts for what they were: brighter and bolder than the Sun. And perhaps between them both, that was the strongest magical spell of all: *love*.



One day, Violet disappeared. She stopped responding to Hailey's texts and seemed to vanish from school altogether. After several weeks of no contact, Hailey was devastated. *What did I do wrong?* she worried, obsessing over every little detail of the past three months. Eventually Hailey realized

that this wasn't her fault at all, but her heart hurt no less.

"I need to remember that this, too, shall pass," Hailey murmured upon the midnight sky. "I just hope that wherever Violet is, she is safe, she is okay, and she is loved."

Later that night, there was a quiet knock on the front door of her house. Hailey would have missed it entirely if it hadn't been for her magic wand amplifying the sound. She dashed downstairs to find out who could have been outside so late at night, secretly hoping her stars had been listening.

When Hailey opened the door, there was Violet. Well, it appeared to be Violet—a more boyish version of Violet, if that was even possible. She was soaking wet, drenched in the sweat of a summer storm. Her eyes were swollen red from crying, and the luscious green hair that Hailey adored was gone, badly dyed, and chopped into a completely boring, double-dutch chocolate bowl cut.

"My stepmom threw out all of my clothes we bought together and told me she would never call



The Sisters from the Stars

me Violet again,” sobbed the small child in the doorway. “I ran away to the only person I feel safe with: *You*.”

Without any hesitation, Hailey dragged Violet inside the house and into her arms. They both cried together until they couldn’t. Soon after, the girls raided the kitchen for a snack and retreated upstairs into more familiar territory: Hailey’s bedroom.

“Hailey?” Violet carefully asked while digging her feet into the carpet. “Have you ever... have you felt like you were meant to be somebody, or something, different than what



your parents want?”

The star princess gulped.

“Tell me more,” Hailey replied, barely managing any voice at all.

“It’s just...” Violet twiddled her thumbs anxiously. “For most of my life,” she continued, “I tried to be the perfect boy. I thought that if I could just fit in and meet everyone’s expectations of who I was supposed to be, or who I thought they wanted me to be, then maybe I would change, too. Maybe I would finally be normal.”

Hailey’s chin started to quiver uncontrollably. She was trying to contain how much she understood—how could she not? While she never struggled with this ‘gender’ thing that humans were so obsessed with, Hailey imagined it wasn’t all that different from being a star in a human girl’s body.

“But I didn’t change,” sighed Violet, her body sinking deeper into the floor. “And everybody else—they knew it, too. They continued expecting and enforcing all of these things and ideas of me that weren’t me at all. Because of my body. Because...”

“I hear you,” interrupted Hailey. She gently took her best friend’s hand into her own.

“I just want to be happy.” Violet wiped the tears building across the skyline of her cheekbone. “I just want to be free to be whoever I am, however that turns out to be. It should be so simple, but it’s not. Why does life have to be this way?”

“Violet.” Hailey paused for a moment, barely managing the thoughts swirling over and over in her head. “Violet, what if... what if you could be yourself all the time, everywhere, without question? Would that make your life easier?”

Violet sighed, then shook her head.

“Yes, yes, but that’s never gonna happen. Nobody will ever see me as anything but this ugly freak.”

“No, Violet. I want you to hear me out. I’m serious.” There was now a sharpness in Hailey’s voice that couldn’t be ignored. “What if we—together—could make it so that nobody would ever force you to be a Victor again, for the rest of your life?”

“That would be like waking up from a nightmare.”

With her free hand, Hailey reached out to touch Violet’s face. *If I could only bring back her spark*, Hailey thought. That spark had always been so precious to her. *I wish, I want, more than anything... for my sweet friend to be seen and loved by everyone, for everything that she is on the inside.*

“As you wish, my love,” whispered an unexpected but familiar



voice inside Hailey's heart.

In what felt like an instant, the entire room blacked out. Hailey could barely make out Violet's face, even with the moonlight still gleaming through the window. But then, without a moment's notice, Hailey's palm resting on Violet's cheekbone began to glow. A sparkling amber light trickled from her fingertips and danced gracefully across Violet's nose and into her big brown eyes.

"H-h-Hailey?"

Violet tried to speak, but her throat couldn't manage to squeeze a single sound. She had nothing to explain what or how she was feeling, even while watching her beloved minty shoulder-length hair magically grow back right in front of her eyes.

Hailey, on the other hand, seemed entirely in the know. She stood up and instinctively reached her hand for the ceiling. Her magic wand immediately shot upward, levitating high above her palm. Stardust emblazoned the wand's handle, and its perfectly round rose quartz core shot out a brilliant spread of rainbow magic that enveloped the girls in every direction.

"May the light of love lift the veil of her truth to everyone," confidently spoke Hailey, every word bellowing across the room.

Hailey closed her eyes and listened to the deepest part of her heart, her song, soaring through the air. Her entire body glistened brighter than ever before.



Suddenly, and with all of the rhyme and reason in The Universe, a bright beam of light burst through the wand and poured itself into Violet's chest. Her skin and hair began glowing brighter and more colorful than Hailey herself, and her body skyrocketed up through the ceiling and into another

dimension. A lavender and bright blue nebula swirled around Violet's entire body until her whole being was cocooned in what could be best described as pure love.

Stars exploded in every direction. Light poured from the tips of Violet's fingers, toes, and head. She screamed not in fear, but with hope. Her wardrobe, her skin, her everything—all that she felt trapped in—melted away and uncovered something new, something real. *Finally and forever, Violet was unlocked. She was free.*

The lights turned back on. Hailey's bedroom quickly returned to normal, as if nothing magical had happened at all. But something had indeed happened, something that surprised them both.

As Violet glanced into the mirror, her glistening black-night eyes widened brightly. There was a twinkle now, a softness that she had never seen before.

"I'm... beautiful," gasped Violet, her hands covering her mouth. "You've made me... beautiful."

Hailey gently took her best friend's hand and squeezed it softly.

"No, my sweet Violet. You made yourself beautiful. You were always beautiful. We just made it a little easier for the rest of the world to see what you have known all along."

Both girls leapt into each other's arms. It was a collision of love, kinda like a supernova of two hearts blazing across the midnight sky. They stood there, hand in hand, for what felt

like hours and probably until the end of time.

From that night onward, Violet was, as they say, forever changed. Nobody questioned her name or pronouns again, even when Violet decided not to have a gender at all. As for Hailey and Violet, they remained the bestest of friends. And wherever they went and whomever they met, both stars shined their love and beamed with pride, “Hello, world! We are Hailey and Violet, starhearts of the light, *the Sisters from the Stars*.”





Valara and the Magic Eater

written by A.K. Blue & illustrated by Caterina Gerbasi

Valara crouched on the bare rock of the outcropping and wrapped her cloak tighter against the cold wind. Below, clouds swirled around the Mountains of Magic like a sea of mist, forever obscuring the ground. Valara was supposed to be scrying, so she gazed at the clouds hiding the sky and tried to see pictures of the future in them.

She couldn't do it.

Valara had climbed high on the outcropping so the other magical women wouldn't see her fail. Below, they stood motionless, as if in a trance, obviously scrying quite successfully. That morning they had ridden the steep path down from the town to the outcropping and its incredible view. Their mountain goats, as big as horses, huddled for warmth nearby. Valara was supposedly the apprentice, but no one had shown her what to do. *Well, she would figure it out herself.* She set her jaw and concentrated on the clouds.

It had been like that ever since she had revealed herself as a magical girl. It seemed long ago, but it was only a year.

"Mom, I'm really a girl," she had said.

Her mother just looked at her for a moment.

"You're serious."

Valara's heart pounded. *Would she be rejected? Ridiculed?*

Her mother smiled. “I thought you might be, but I wasn’t sure. That’s great. Do you have a name?”

Valara did, but she was too overcome by relief and happiness to do more than nod.

Later, her mother told Valara’s father. Her father stammered, “Oh, um... what does that make me?” But soon he let Valara know that he still loved her, too.

Her parents took her to the lodge, and the magical women accepted her as one of them. That night, the town celebrated with fireworks and a feast. Only magical women had the strong magic that the town needed, and Valara was the first new magical girl in years. She wore a beautiful gown with flowers in her magically-lengthened hair. She had never been so happy.

She couldn’t wait to learn magic. But the women were too busy to teach her, always hurrying somewhere because the town used magic so much. The crops needed magic to grow in the stony ground of the plateau. The lake needed magic so the water would run uphill to the town and farmlands. The houses needed magic fires for cooking and keeping warm. The only thing the magical women taught Valara was a signal spell in case of emergency.

On top of that, Valara still had to go to school. After class, when her friends were playing, she had to go to the lodge to work as an apprentice, which meant chores like cleaning. She didn’t get home until dinnertime, and after dinner she had to



do her homework. By the time she was finished, she was exhausted, but it was the only time she could learn magic. The lodge let her borrow spellbooks, and as she studied them, her tiredness and loneliness disappeared. The first spell she

mastered was a magic light she could use to read under her blanket after bedtime. Except when she tried to demonstrate her spell, the women were too busy to look.

She glanced at the volcano, below and way off to her right. It was far from the town but connected to the mountain by a ridge, which was still too close for Valara. Instead of lava, the volcano spewed wild magic from the heart of the mountain.

The magic was invisible, but sometimes she could make out ripples in the air above it. When you approached, the ground trembled and the air was heavy with magical energy.

“It can turn you into a turnip if you get too close,” Elnid, the oldest of the magical women, had warned her once while gazing at some jars of strangely-colored powders that had been collected from the volcano’s slope.

Valara concentrated as hard as she could on the clouds. *Come on, scry!* She had a headache. Her eyes were sore. She hadn’t eaten since that morning, and her stomach rumbled.

It was no use. *Maybe she really was hopeless, and the women were right to ignore her.*

Just then, Valara noticed the women were talking instead of scrying. She climbed down to join them, but her heart sank when she saw their faces.

“What’s going on?” Valara asked.

Elnid turned to Valara, her expression grave. “There is trouble ahead,” she said. “Trouble for the whole town.”

A few days later, the monster appeared.

Valara was outside when it happened, walking from school to the lodge. Someone pointed to the sky and screamed. Valara looked up.

At first the monster was just a giant shadow in the overcast sky, but as it descended through the clouds it became clearer. It looked like a gigantic jellyfish covered with grey scales.

The monster passed overhead, gliding across the town and into the farmland. Valara raised her arms and chanted the signal spell. It rang like a silver bell, and a bubble of pink energy spread out like a ripple.

She ran after the monster.

The monster stopped over the farms, hovering menacingly. Then it slowly crumbled into dust, which fell in dark curtains like heavy rain.

When Valara got closer, she saw that it wasn't dust at all. What she had thought were scales were actually individual creatures. They looked like rats with hairless wings on their backs. The creatures flew down and swarmed over the crops as if to devour them.

The crops fought back. Fruit trees shot lemons, oranges, and apples at the creatures. The corn slashed and jabbed like they did with crows. All Valara could do was watch helplessly.

She heard galloping hooves. The magical women appeared, riding their mountain goats. They charged into the swarm, firing bolts of magical force from their hands. The creatures



squealed in terror, then flew away, circling overhead like a storm. The ones at the center grabbed each other and stuck together. As more creatures joined them, the monster reassembled. When the monster was complete, it drifted back the way it had come, over the town and beyond the cliffs, rising until it disappeared.

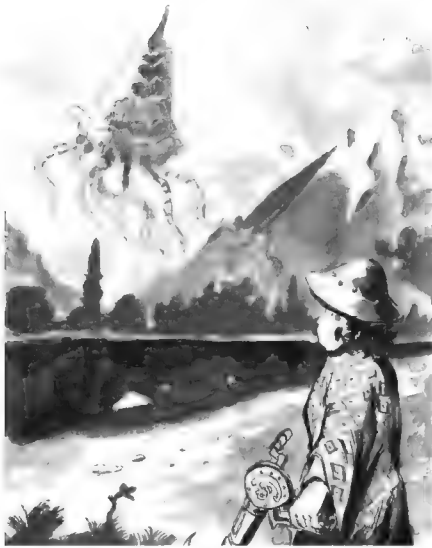
Valara looked around at the damage. To her surprise, the crops were untouched. The attack seemed to have done nothing. Then she noticed the crystallized topsoil: the creatures had eaten the magic! *The crops would soon die, and the town would have no food.*

Elnid announced an emergency meeting at the lodge, but Valara wasn't invited. She had nothing to contribute. It was near dinnertime anyway, so she went home.

The monster returned the next day, this time flying towards the lake. A waterfall, runoff from higher up the mountain, fell out of the clouds to fill it. The lake used a lot of magic to make the water pour into the aqueducts and flow uphill to the town and farms.

The women were waiting. Noette, the most learned of the women, had devised a plan. All twelve stood in formation, ready to pool their magical energy into a single attack. The bolts they fired into the sky lit up the clouds like lightning.

Valara would only get in the way, so she stood aside, watching. The big warrior Zoa, who had the strongest magic,



was in front. She held the thread gun that would prevent the monster from escaping the attack. When the monster was above the lake, Zoa fired a hook into the ground that couldn't be pulled loose until its spell was cancelled. Then, she aimed at the monster and fired the unbreakable thread. At its tip was another magic hook.

The monster twisted out of the thread's path, moving with surprising speed. As Zoa rewound the spool of the thread gun, the front of the monster puckered into a mouth-like opening and spat a puff of gas at the women.

The gas engulfed the women, but they held their breath and the wind blew the gas away. The thread gun finished rewinding and Zoa aimed again. But before she could fire, the thread gun clattered on the stony ground. She hadn't dropped it; it had fallen through her hand.

Valara could see through the women's bodies. They were fading out.

"Valara!" Elnid said. "We're shifting to another dimension. We'll be trapped there until the monster is destroyed." Her voice was fading along with her body. "*You have magic, Valara. Don't be afraid to use it! Go to the lodge and find a way to...*"



And she was gone.

The monster broke up into creatures again. This time, they were flying fish with the vicious jaws and teeth of piranhas. They dove into the lake, churning the surface with activity. The water flowing up the aqueducts suddenly reversed course



and began running downhill.

The flying fish surfaced, bloated with magic. They looked too heavy to fly, but they flapped their wings and pulled their sagging bodies into the air.

Again, the creatures circled the sky and drew together until the monster was back. Serenely, it floated away.

Valara sat alone in the lodge's gloomy library. The candles on the table revealed tall bookcases crammed with scrolls, spellbooks, and magical objects. She had spent hours searching for information about the monster and hadn't found anything. She was going to have to figure it out herself.

She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. *What did she know about the monster?* It was too huge and powerful to attack. *What else?* It was greedy. Having seen how hungrily the rat creatures had descended on the farmland, and the feeding frenzy in the lake, she had no doubt of that. *Was there any limit to how much magic it could devour?* Almost certainly. *Would it know when to stop?* Maybe not...

The first glimmerings of a plan took shape in her mind.

The next day, Valara didn't go to school. She waited by the edge of the plateau with Olo, one of the mountain goats. She had made friends with Olo while cleaning the stables. They were both so nervous that it was almost a relief when the monster's gigantic dark outline appeared in the clouds.

The monster descended, passing overhead, and hovered over the town. Now it was going to steal all the magic from there! Valara raised her arms and used all her strength to send her signal spell straight at the monster. This time the spell rang like a gong, so loud that the whole sky seemed to vibrate. The bubble was so strong that it splashed when it hit the monster, like a wave hitting a rock. She wouldn't be able to use magic again for hours, but that had to get the monster's attention!

It did. The monster started moving towards her. Valara climbed into the saddle and shouted, "Let's go!" Olo charged over the edge of the plateau and down the mountainside. She pulled the reins and they turned right, towards the volcano.

Olo had to pick her way along the steep slope. Sometimes the mountainside became a vertical cliff, and she had to hop from foothold to foothold and then stop to search for the next one. Olo was doing her best, but she was so slow!

When Valara looked back, the monster had filled the sky and was gaining on them. Her plan needed to work.

They reached the ridge between the mountain and the volcano. She tugged the reins again and they scrambled along the top of the ridge. Loose shale clattered down the slopes.

The volcano loomed above her as she got closer. She could make out the ghostly, iridescent magic jetting out of the crater at the top of the volcano's cone. They began to pass spots where stray bolts of magic had hit the ground. There



was a swirl of pink sand with seashells, a patch of poisonous-looking crystals, and an outcropping that had been twisted into the semblance of a dragon's head. It seemed to be watching them.

Olo balked, refusing to move closer to the volcano. Valara was too scared to look back but she could feel the monster right behind her. She closed her eyes and hugged Olo's neck.

Nothing happened. When she opened her eyes, the monster was passing low overhead and heading for the volcano.

The monster floated above the volcano's crater, drinking the magic. Valara pulled out the thread gun and fired. The thread hit the monster. She fired the anchoring hook into the



side of the volcano's cone. The monster was trapped.

Continuing to feed on the magic, the monster began to swell. It tugged at the thread but the thread held. Valara turned Olo around and retreated up the ridge. Olo didn't need any urging to move quickly. The monster kept inflating, getting bigger and looking more strained.

There was a tremen-

dous explosion. The shock wave nearly knocked Valara out of the saddle. When she looked back, the monster was gone.

The magical women were waiting for Valara when she got back to the town. When the monster was destroyed, all the magic it had eaten was released. The magic soil had returned. The water was running uphill again, which was good because Olo was thirsty.

That night they celebrated in the lodge's dining hall. As the fire crackled and the many bowls and cups gleamed with dancing firelight, Valara described everything that had happened after the magical women had disappeared.

When she was done, Elnid said, "You did very well, Valara. I never doubted you."

"I did," Zoa said. "I was amazed when I found myself by the lake." The women around the table laughed.

Perhaps it was the small draught of wine she'd been given, but Valara spoke up. "You should have been amazed, since you never taught me anything."

The laughter stopped, replaced by silence. Elnid frowned. "Valara, you know the demands on our time are too great already. We can't add another."

"You'd have more time if I was helping you. You just don't think I can do it."

"You do have a point," said Noette. Behind her spectacles, her large eyes contemplated Valara. "You've certainly proven

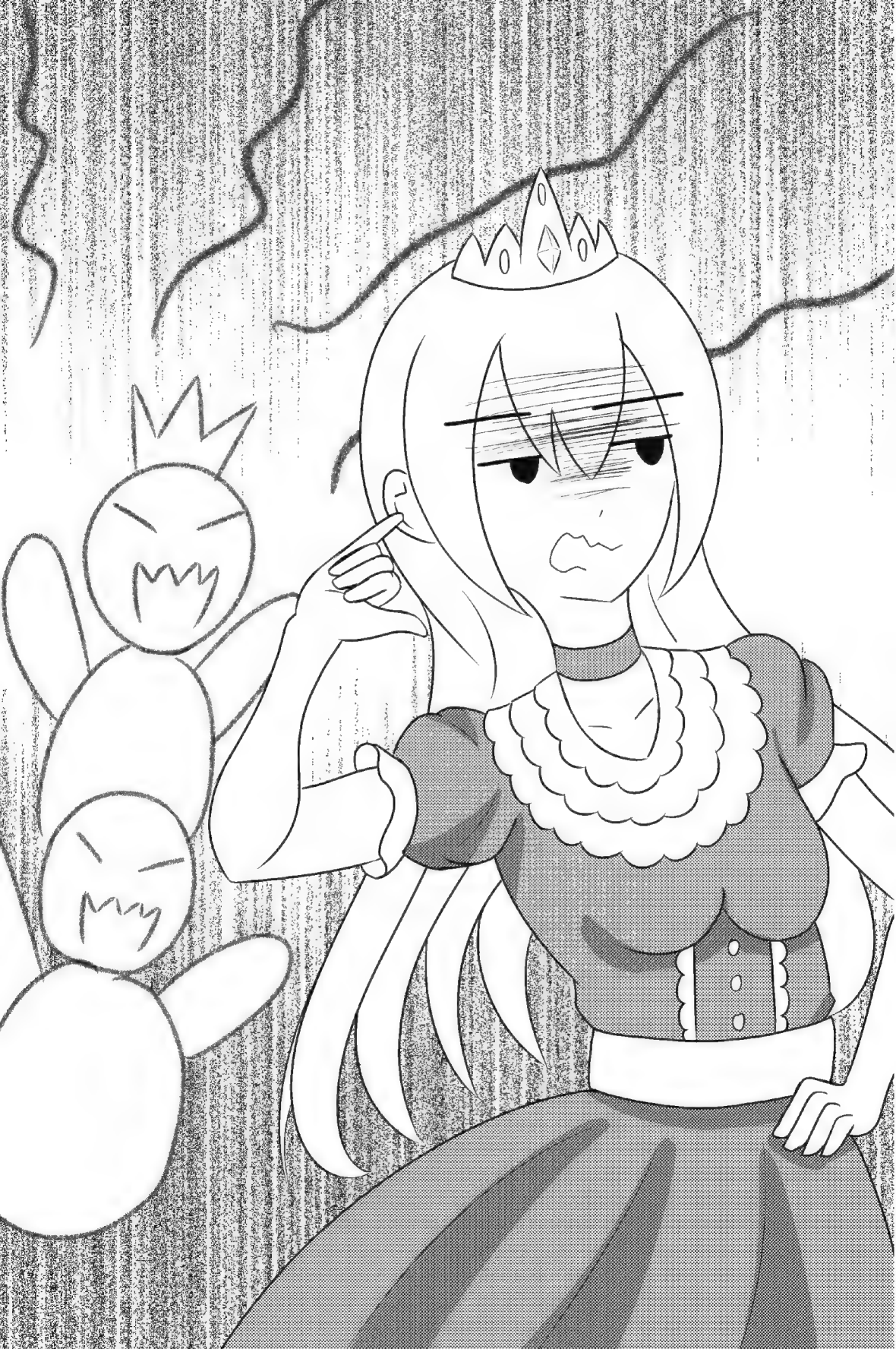


yourself. I will gladly give you instruction. We can start tonight if you want.”

Valara had been prepared to argue and was too surprised to respond. Her anger drained away and she lowered her head, ashamed of her outburst. “I’d like that very much,” she finally said.

She looked up at Noette. Noette looked pleased with her. Maybe Noette was pleased to have a pupil, but Valara realized she was happy to see a girl stand up for herself.

The celebration resumed and Valara joined in wholeheartedly. *For the first time, the lodge felt like home.*



Can't Stop the Princess

written & illustrated by Anya L. Archer

Julietta yawned as the king went on and on with his complaints from atop his gaudy throne. It was needlessly large, towering so high over her head that it was hard to make out the details. The chamberlain, seeing Julietta's disregard, admonished her immediately.

"Prince Jules! Even if you are the prince, it is still extremely improper for you to conduct yourself in such a way in front of his majesty!" he barked.

Prince, prince, prince, yada yada yada. That was all anyone called her—though she fancied herself a princess, *thank you very much.* Even the legendary sword passed down the royal bloodline had acknowledged her as such. The moment she touched its hilt, the sword turned into a cutesy wand, and instead of manifesting the usual 'suit of armor,' it dressed her in a fancy magical girl's dress, much to the horror of the king and chamberlain.

She cocked her head to the side. "I thought we agreed that you would call me 'Julietta' after I defeated those bandits for you."

The chamberlain's face flushed and twisted as he tried to force out the word. "Julietta! You need to learn how to conduct yourself more properly in the throne room."

“Whatever.” Julietta shrugged and looked at the king, her father, even though she could hardly think of him as such. “You want me to defeat a dragon? Me. Alone. Against a dragon. What even led you to this idea?” It normally took a full unit of knights just to repel a dragon, let alone defeat one. But he expected her to go by herself?

The king held a hand over his mouth and cleared his throat. “As a potential heir to the throne, it is only natural for you to protect the kingdom.”

As if! she screamed in her mind. *When was the last time the king personally fought a monster? Oh, that's right, never!*

Julietta sighed and turned around, ignoring the chamberlain's protests while storming out of the throne room. Her family kept sending her out to deal with problems, each one bigger and more dangerous than the last. It was obvious what they were trying to do, but she wouldn't let them get their way.

“Could you prepare a carriage for me?” she asked Carla, her personal attendant and one of the few people she called friend and ally. Ever since Julietta had saved Carla from a group of thieves in the marketplace, she had devoted herself to being Julietta's loyal maid. When Julietta first started on her journey to become a princess, Carla always encouraged and helped her.

“Princess! Please reconsider,” Carla urged. “It's too reckless for you to go fight a dragon by yourself.”

“If I don’t go, they’ll never get off my case.” Julietta smiled.
“Thanks for worrying about me, but I’ll find a way to manage somehow.”

“One does not simply ‘find a way’ to manage a dragon!”
Julietta chuckled.



The ride took a few days. As they approached the mountainside that the dragon was last seen on, Julietta leapt from her carriage and pulled out the legendary sword-turned-wand attached to her belt. She flicked the wand in her hand and twirled around on her feet. Parts of a poofy pink dress filled with bows and frills magically appeared around her. Julietta danced and skipped around in a pillar of light as her outfit came together perfectly, then struck a pose as she finished. That part was completely unnecessary, but she liked doing it anyway.

“Please take care,” said Carla. She clutched her hands to her chest.

“I’ll do my best.” Julietta jumped up and flew through the air. The cool wind felt good against her face as she twirled and spun in loops. She was free: free from the king, free from the palace, free from the earth. She considered just running away, finding some quiet place to live, and forgetting about everyone forcing her to be a prince. *I’ll take a look at the dragon*, she told herself. If she was too scared, she would high-tail it out of there.

A beautiful valley sat between the mountains, filled with trees and a pretty stream. Julietta landed in the grass and waved her wand. Rose petals appeared in the air, falling like snow. With a flick of her hand, the petals spun and danced like a whirlpool. She skipped and danced around, spinning her wand as if it were a baton and conducting the petals into



a performance while she hummed along. Julietta had almost forgotten her original mission until everything around her suddenly went black.

“What are you doing in my territory, princess?” A large dragon hovered above her, blocking out the sunlight. They were bigger than even her father’s stupid throne, and when their wings were extended they almost reached across the entire width of the valley. Their scales were a bright crimson shade, flickering like flames under the sunlight.

Julietta looked up with sparkling eyes and jumped.

“Yes!” she squealed. “Someone new actually called me a princess!”

The red dragon landed and raised their eyebrows at her. “What’s wrong about calling a princess a princess?”

“It’s not wrong. It just makes me happy. You’d be surprised how many people insist on calling me a prince.”

Julietta puffed out her cheeks and crossed her arms. She made a show of jerking her head from side to side.

“Hmph. The matters of humans aren’t of interest to me.” The dragon flicked their head away and slapped their tail against the mountainside. “Why did you come here?”

“I came here to see you.”

The dragon narrowed their eyes. “You want to fight me that badly?”

“Not really, no.”

The dragon’s knees gave out, causing them to collapse on



the valley floor. The force of the impact shook Julietta off her feet. Animals ran away from their hiding spots and branches fell from trees. Julietta could've sworn she saw the mountain top move.

"Huh?" The dragon stared at her, their jaw gaping wide.

Julietta stretched her arms behind her back and paced around.

"Like, the King wanted to me to be a prince, yeah? So he kept telling me to go deal with things like bandits and swamp golems and such. They want me to either man up and be a prince or die so they won't have to deal with me anymore." She pirouetted and threw her hands out. "But I'm still alive and still fabulous, so now they told me to come get rid of you."

"That is just low," the dragon snarled.

"I know, right? But I don't want to fight you. I just want to have a talk. Princess Julietta at your service."

She curtsied with her greeting, then waved her wand, summoning a chair and table complete with a self-pouring tea set.

"May I be so privileged as to know your name?" Julietta asked.

The dragon narrowed their eyes. They looked Julietta up and down for a minute. "Danielle."



“So tell me, Danielle, why have you been destroying all those villages?” Julietta asked while sipping her cup of tea.

“Because you @#!\$% humans won’t leave me alone!” The dragon whipped their tail furiously, hitting a boulder, then smashing it to pieces.

A large chunk bigger than Julietta herself flew right past her head. Barely noticing it, she covered her mouth to yawn, then took another sip out of her teacup. “Please go on.”

“I was living in the forest,” Danielle the dragon explained, “and then you humans burned it down. I moved away, and more humans came after me. I found new hunting grounds, then you humans took all of the cattle. *How would you feel if people constantly followed you around to steal your home and harass you?*”

Julietta tilted her head. “Why didn’t you just tell them to stop?”

“How am I supposed to talk to any human if the moment they see me they scream and run away?”

“We’re talking now, aren’t we?”

The dragon blinked and sat down. “I guess. But still. Do you think you can get them to leave me alone?”

“I mean, I am a princess in the line of succession,” said Julietta. “Though the king right now doesn’t listen to me.”

Danielle leaned closer until their heads almost touched. “What would you do for me if you could lead the country?”

“I can give you a place to live and tell people not to bother

you. Or you can come live at the palace if you promise not to hurt anyone, and we can have tea parties.” Julietta sighed and sipped her tea. “Everything could be so peaceful if they would just let me be a princess.”

The dragon scratched their cheek with their nail. “You know what? I have an idea.”

After laying the plan out, they switched to talking about themselves and quickly became friends.

The king raised his glass and everyone in the banquet hall cheered. He was beaming with joy while his advisors danced and enjoyed the food. Everyone joked and laughed as they mingled together. They had finally gotten rid of the embarrassing prince who acted like a princess, relieving the royal family from a stain on its image. Everything could go back to the way it was supposed to be.

Except it didn't.

There was a loud crash as the roof caved in. Large chunks of rubble fell everywhere. The king and his advisors screamed and ran to a corner of the room.

A large red dragon flew through the hole and landed, their wings instantly dismantling the castle's walls. Smoke puffed out of Danielle's nostrils as they glared at the king.

“I heard you've been doing bad things to my girl,” the dragon snarled. “If you don't want to turn into lunch meat, then you better treat her with proper respect!”



"You're...you're WHAT now?" asked the king. "What is this nonsense?"

Julietta stood up from behind the dragon's neck and poked her head out above Danielle's so the king could see her. She climbed a little higher, looked around the hall at all the people present, and grinned. "So um, hi. I got the dragon to stop destroying villages."

"This is my girl, Julietta," said Danielle the dragon.

"We became friends and made a pact together." Julietta stood up and puffed out her chest. She placed one hand on her hip and extended the other into the sky. "So, since the dragon is not rampaging around anymore, we're good now, right? You'll stop messing with me for being a princess, right?"

The king's jaw dropped to the floor. "Knights!"

The royal knights barged into the room at his call, but they all froze at the sight of Danielle.

Julietta smiled widely and waved at the knights.

Danielle blew out fire into the air as a greeting. Everything not hammered to the floor was immediately knocked over by the wind it created. The golden chandelier hanging from above and bits of flame licked at the



knights' boots.

Suddenly, the knights dropped their weapons. They stood at attention and saluted.

"All hail Princess Julietta!" they shouted in unison.

Julietta turned back to the stunned king and snickered.

"By the way, I want to make some policy changes and need a place in the garden where I can have a tea party with Danielle over here." Julietta patted the dragon's head. "Soooo, are we cool, old man?"

The king couldn't say anything. He could only gulp and nod.

In the end, and with the help of her new dragon friend, Julietta had the last word for everything in the kingdom. She left the king and some of his old advisors in place, mostly so she didn't have to deal with the more boring stuff herself. As promised, she set about making space in the royal courtyard for Danielle. Still, it was hard for them to land without crushing all the flowers.

"Sometimes I wish you could shrink yourself a little bit." Julietta held her chin and pouted. "It would be nice to dance with you."

"Some dragons can turn into a humanoid form, but I haven't tried it myself." Danielle rolled around in mid-air and hovered from side to side. "Would you like me to give it a shot?"

Julietta balled her hands in front of her chest and jumped up and down. “Yes! Yes! I would love that!”

“Anything for my best friend. Besides, I’ve been wondering what it would be like to stand on two legs, especially since meeting you. Let’s see.”

Danielle chanted something and a giant array of magical circles surrounded them in the sky. They glowed and glowed until the dragon became encased in a ball of red light. The ball of light shrank until it was about Julietta’s size, slowly floating down to the grass. The light surrounding Danielle burst out and fluttered away like rose petals in the wind.

Danielle’s humanoid form was a girl about a head shorter than Julietta. They had crimson hair, the same color as their scales, along with a pair of horns growing out of their head that pointed to the back. Their frilly dress perfectly matched Julietta’s.

“There,” Danielle’s voice was lighter and squeakier than before, “I like this. What do you think?”

“AHHH. You’re even more adorable now! Cuddle me?” squeed Julietta.

Danielle swung Julietta into her arms and giggled in happiness. The two danced and laughed and played until the sun set and beyond. After years of sweetness and fun, Julietta and Danielle decided to marry, much to the delight of all their citizens. Together, they co-ruled the kingdom into a new era of prosperity and lived happily ever after.



My Story, the Wolf

written by Abbey Darling & illustrated by Sybil Lamb

Growing up, I was told a lot of things. A lot of things about being a wolf. Wolves were supposed to be strong, feared and heartless. I wasn't supposed to be loved, pretty, and emotional. I wasn't supposed to be me.



I always wanted to wear gorgeous, pretty clothes like suits, sundresses, and swimwear. Everyone told me I was too smelly, too fat, and definitely too hairy. Other animals joked that I must never get cold. That's false! I do. Why do animals think it's okay to say that to me? And why do humans have so little hair and such pretty clothes?

My mother would tell me, "God gave you fur. What do you need that human nonsense for?"

"To look fabulous," I would reply. Mom would growl at me and walk away in shame. I felt horrible for many years after. I stopped trying to be me and started being what everyone else wanted me to be. That is, until I found Grandmother's house and the most beautiful clothes ever.

You see, every Sunday, Grandmother would go out and



protest with her family. And every Sunday, I would go to her house and wear her clothes. I liked the way they made me feel, and she had some stellar pieces. I mean, Grandmother was the queen of fashion herself in the woods. It also didn't hurt that we're both a size 12.

On one particular Sunday, I remember taking a nice bath in her tub and brushing out my fur, soaking longer than usual because of this fight I got into with some pigs earlier. Afterwards, I twirled around the living room in this gorgeous, flowy blue skirt and cream lace top, daydreaming of another life. There, feeling gorgeous, I imagined myself deep in the woods huffing and puffing and blowing those new high-rise tree condos down. It was magical and it was mine, at least until...

"Wolf!" a voice cried.

It was Grandmother. No, not my grandmother, but The Grandmother who lived in the forest, whose dresses I wore every Sunday. The very same Grandmother who, at the time, in her hands, held a towel and brush covered in my fur. She was livid! Upon seeing her, I gave her my most sincere smile, revealing all my teeth to show I meant well. It didn't occur to me at the time that such a smile is ...well, *intimidating*, to say the least.

"Wolf! Wolf! What are you doing in my house? AND IN MY CLOTHES!?" Grandmother's feet thundered in quick anger as she picked up the dresses from the floor. I was



freaking out, feeling a brew of shame, fear and anger. “You are an animal,” she screamed, “and animals do not wear clothes, especially not wolves, and especially not my clothes!! You are disgusti—”

Before she could say more, I ate her. I’m not proud of that, but what else was I supposed to do? What she said hurt me. She reminded me of my mother and everyone who ever told me I could not be beautiful. I am beautiful, hairy, and I can wear whatever I want! So of course I ate her, and I’d do it again too!

Just then, there was a knock.

“Hello? Grandmother?” spoke a soft voice from outside of the house.

I scrambled, collecting all the clothes and throwing them onto the bed. The door clicked, still unlocked from Grandmother’s entrance. I darted under the covers with all the clothes as I heard footsteps come up the stairs and the bedroom door creak open.

I peeked from underneath the blanket. There stood a strange human in a white hooded fur cape, her head buried in an oversized phone. As she absently placed her HUMAN RIGHTS TOO sign on the wood floor, she



bumped over a lamp and some books while getting the lamp, then the end table while getting the books, and eventually a vase full of dusty plastic flowers and Himalayan salt crystals. Thankfully, the actual pictures hanging up were safe from the clumsy white girl.

“Namaste, Grandma. I was so worried when you left early from today’s Human Lives First March that I skipped my sesh @TheBronzeHealingRetreatCenterofHealingandHealing to check on #u #LoveIsAllYouNeed #AllFablesMatter,” replied the white-covered caped crusader, still staring at her screen. “Besides, a goat ate my yoga mat last week #gross #FirstWorld Problems #SorryNotSorry. Do you, like, have a spare I could borrow?”

I faked a cough, realizing I didn’t know the girl’s name. I hoped Grandmother didn’t know either.

“Is that you, dear ...Wh..Whypo?” I weakly said.

“Grandma! Oh, excuse me. I forgot: @realGuruGranma #blessed,” Whypo asked, looking up from her phone. “Has a cold stripped you of your voice? I know this, like, AMAZING juice cleanse of wild grass covered in organic squirrel droppings. It’s only \$59.95 too!!! #CleanEating #ItTasted Great #NoReally #ILovedIt”

I was overwhelmed. Here was this really boring white girl trying so hard to be interesting that she didn’t even



notice I wasn't her Human Supremacist relative. I mean, the only pointy thing on me were my ears—and they were under a scarf!

"Oh wow, uh, you don't say," I growled at her between my teeth.

Whypo suddenly put her hands over her unusually large mouth.

"O.M.G. YASSS gurrll, slay! What hairy arms you have! I.M.H.O. that's soooooo brave! I am LIVING for your real fur. Let's take a #Selfie! #NoFilter #TransformationTuesday #ExceptItsSunday #BackToNature"

"Just keeping it real, dear Whypo," I sighed. I didn't know how much more of this I could handle.



Whypo pulled out her selfie stick from her designer picnic basket. Coming closer with it, her little beady human eyes squinted at me with even more puzzling admiration.

"Wow, @realGuruGrandma!!!" Whypo declared. "#JSYK!!! You have like the most beautiful broad shoulders! You have to tell me: Is that from our sacred ancestral side?"

"Tell me more about your ANCESTRAL side!" I howled.

Aghast, Whypo threw her phone into the air and screamed. “WOLF!!! You’re not my Guru, and you’re not even a ‘real’ wom—”

At that, I ate her. I ate all of her up while standing in that beautiful dress on top of the bed. She questioned my existence and that was wrong, so I ate her. I ate all of her and all of that human nonsense, leaving just me and that beautiful dress that made me feel whole.

Meanwhile, Whypo and Grandmother were situated nicely at the bottom of my stomach learning their newest yoga pose. After changing into now my fanciest gown to better compliment my bulging stomach, the house was quiet. No one to bother me. No one to judge me. No one to say who or what I was supposed to be. I was free to be my most beautiful self.

So what does one do in a moment of looking fabulous, you ask? Well, I did what anyone would: I had a tea party, of course!

Grandmother’s furs came over that afternoon. There, I served tea and decadence that one could only find in the Great Forest. The furs came dressed in sequined vests and footie pajamas, flowery summer dresses, and rubber rain boots. You name it, they showed it. It was fierce and fabulous! We dined on a delicious collection of footwear that came from such far-off, wondrous places like Shoes-4-Less while



we talked fashion and played cards.

No longer was I alone. I had friends. I was happy and howled long and loud as I let the sound of my voice fill the house completely. “ARHWOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“Cupcake! I’m home!”

“Oh my gosh!!” I jumped off my chair, crashing teacups to the ground as I ran around the kitchen barking wildly. Meanwhile, I could feel Whypo and Grandma getting tossed around inside my stomach, Grandma smacking Whypo with her foot. *Someone is home!! I don’t know why, but I am SO EXCITED!!! Someone is home to see...CUPCAKE?!?* I paused in the chaos of the kitchen as a strange figure appeared in the doorway.

There stood this kind of cute Woodcutter. There was something strange about the way he held that axe of his, his neatly trimmed beard, and his cute mason-jar-shaped side holster that told me he was a fashionable, rugged man of the woods.

“IS THAT A HOWL?!? Where’s the wolf?! WOLF!” the Woodcutter screamed while running across the room, his axe held high. But when he saw me, he suddenly let go of it. The axe slammed into the ground and split apart the hardwood floor.

“Sweetie pie, what are you doing all dressed up? I thought our date at the food court wasn’t until tomorrow?”

I was confused. He relaxed and reached out for me.

“Hey, babycakes, let me bring you down.” Without asking

for my consent, the Woodcutter lifted me up off the table, struggling considerably.

“You can put me down now,” I informed him. But the Woodcutter kept awkwardly smiling at me instead.

“Or we could go outside and howl at wolves.” The Woodcutter grinned.

“Or,” I bit his hand hard and he dropped me, “You can just put me down now.”

“Ow! Wait, honey, are we playing pretend?!” Grabbing a fur from the tea party, Woodcutter fell to the floor and started barking his head off. “Woof! Woof! Woof!” he cried while sticking his tongue out.

What is going on? Is this what humans think I act like? Woodcutter started chewing up a dress. “No! Bad dog!” I yelled, trying to grab the dress from his mouth. He wouldn’t give it up, and I didn’t want to ruin the dress, so I stopped. Instead, I picked up his axe and hollered, “Hey boy, wanna play fetch?”

He dropped the dress and panted heavily, pawing at my legs. “Woof! Woof!”

I threw the axe across the room. It lodged into the couch, stuffing flying everywhere. Woodcutter awkwardly ran on all fours to the couch, where he struggled to pull the axe out with his teeth. Just as I was picking up the ruined dress, a cellphone on the floor rang. I picked it up and a familiar voice came through.



“Hello? Woodcutter? Help me! Rescue us! And by us, I mean me! I think my makeup is smudging! #Hurry #StayingAlive #Warrior #GrandmaSaysHi,” Whypo shouted from the phone. I could hear her phone going off with a hundred notifications and the thumping of my heart in the background. I didn’t even understand how she got cell service in my stomach.

That was it! I am so done with everyone! They can take it all back! I howled. I huffed and puffed and puked Whypo and Grandmother up. They landed on Woodcutter as he howled in pain, no longer acting. My saliva covered everything in a sticky web. Half of a shoe was stuck to Grandmother’s head, and my broken, lost piggy bank filled with bacon was all over Woodcutter’s hair. Whypo was frantically looking for her phone, which was stuck to her forehead.

“@realGuruGranma! Have you seen my phone?! I need you to find it with your sacred powers! #Emergency,” Whypo cried out.

“You’re a wolf!” Woodcutter yelled.

“Thanks for that, Captain Obvious,” I replied sarcastically.

“I always knew you were a wolf! You didn’t fool—”

At that, I cut him off. I picked up a shoe and threw it at his head. It hit with a thunk!

“THAT’S IT,” I howled. “I am so over all these annoying human things! I’m done with all of you and all of your nonsense! You’re like my mom and all those other animals, and



I'm done with that too! No one gets to decide who or what I am except me! I love who I am and I am done being somebody else."

I huffed and huffed, filling my lungs to three times their size. Grandmother, Whypo and Woodcutter tried to move out of the way, but they were still stuck to my sticky spit. Finally, I puffed and blew all the air. A big gust of wind tore through the house, spiraling and spinning into little and big tornados that gathered up everything. Crystals and gongs and yoga mats and sage sticks and bells and whistles and gem amulets and toilet paper stuck like glue to Woodcutter, Whypo, and Grandmother.

"This doesn't change anything. You'll always be just a wolf in a dress! And you'll always be the villain in this story! How could you ever be the hero?" Grandmother called out amidst the prevailing winds.



"Stories can be rewritten," I howled long and loud. "And like this!" I huffed and puffed and BLEW Grandmother's house down. The house broke apart into pieces. Grandmother, Woodcutter and Whypo, all stuck together in one giant tumbleweed of snot, went flying into the distance, trailing saliva and their junk all over the Great Forest. They were never to be seen again.

What happened to Grandmother's gorgeous clothing? Well, the misfits of the forest came by and everyone found themselves a fabulous piece or two. We had a ball every day, and on Sunday, we had a big brunch in the ruins of Grandmother's house. There were snakes in stockings, three badgers that filled out this glittery dress quite fabulously, and a hippo in a fedora and suspenders. It was beautiful and it was ours. *And no one ever controlled us ever again.*





Night Light

written by Duna Haller & illustrated by Clara Mejías

“**Y**ou have forgotten again about your gifts.”

The five girls sat once again in front of the Firelight. They looked at each other, their faces lit. Tonight, Butterfly is recalling a story, the story of how the sky opened up and Chrysalis became a safe place. This story is also known as *The Tale of Night Light*.

Long ago, the five girls were raised in a different world known as Chrysalis. Many things were possible there, but communication was forbidden. This kept the girls separated from each other, even though they had lived in the same room for almost their entire lives.

In those days on Chrysalis, as *The Tale of Night Light* tells, the sky was cloudy and other people controlled how everyone cared about each other and the world around them. Those other people were sometimes called the Educators, and they limited imagination. The Educators taught those five little girls to be so

afraid that all of the stories they “invented” were kept deep inside their bodies. Every time the girls tried to speak openly about how they related to other people, places, or things, the Educators blinked their eyes and shook their heads with intense, terrifying disapproval.

It was awful, but Butterfly was slowly beginning to change under those cloudy skies. *She, more and more each day, was unforgetting the lies.*

Each of the five girls had names of their own, names that felt so much more interconnected and meaningful than they understood.

Butterfly was part-girl and part-insect. She had beautiful wings and lived inside a cocoon, as Chrysalis tradition had dictated for her kind.

Fairy was a caretaker of forests. But since the cloudy days made all of the forests un-grow, she lived with Butterfly and the other girls. Because she was raised so far away from home, *Fairy was full of both nostalgia and fear.*

Sentinel was the daughter of a dragon, but she didn't know anything about her parents. They passed away during the Fight of the Shiny Dragons, long before the cloudy days began. *She was a pure fighter.*

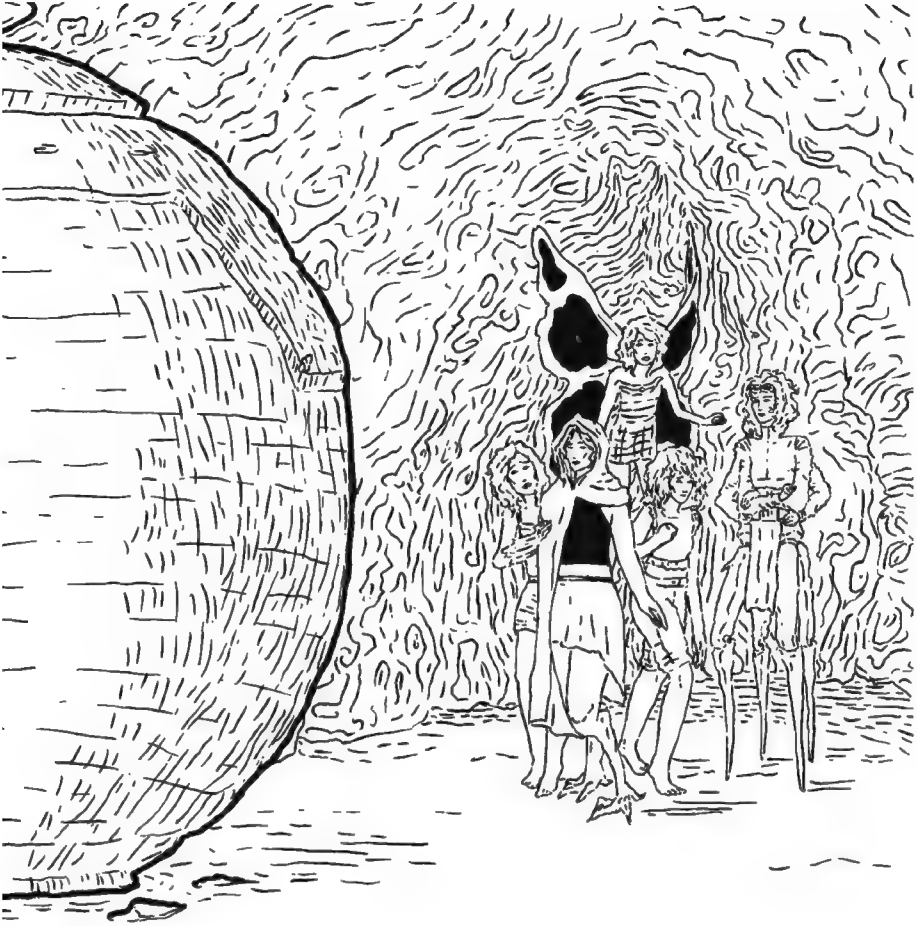
Asher was the child of a sand explorer family. But without her people to guide her, she only knew one thing about her powers: *that Sand was not allowed to grow freely in Chrysalis.*



Dune thought she was just a normal girl, but she felt something important that she couldn't talk about with the others (like so many other things): *she could feel their heartbeats all the time.*

The girls were, luckily, raised in the exact same room where they, as Chrysalis tradition dictated, received gifts one day of the year. That may seem strange, but those gifts made everyone feel less sad about the endless cloudy days. *They were, by any reckoning, the loveliest part of Chrysalis.*

One year, something new happened. It started with the five girls opening giftbox after giftbox, just like every holiday before. There were cooking sets they loved, video games full of colors and references to lost lands that they felt were theirs, marionettes that looked a lot like them, and small amps for making lovely sounds. And finally, there was a box filled



with... sand.

Sand?!? What does the sand mean? the girls wondered.

Fairy thought that the sand was made from portions of dust, dust so vast you couldn't isolate a single speck. It was immense and exceeded what Fairy could imagine. It also terrified her. She had been taught by the Educators that every gift they received must be used in only one way, and sand clearly wasn't that. *What would happen if we became the*

sand?!? she anxiously wondered.

Sentinel thought, because she was strong and always angry, that the only use for a sandbox was to destroy it. But that would leave the whole room full of sand, and sand was forbidden in Chrysalis.

Asher questioned if the sand was useful for... *something*. But because she didn't think her opinion mattered at all, she tried desperately not to appear concerned.

Butterfly wasn't thinking about the sandbox at all, but there were questions building inside her. *Why am I called Butterfly?* she wondered. *Where does that name come from? What is even wrong with me?*

Dune worried that she was made entirely of sand. She was scared that if the others discovered who she really was, they would harm her. Fairy wouldn't want to look at her (and that would confirm she was ugly), Sentinel would destroy her (and then she wouldn't exist anymore), Asher would use her as a tool (making her only just an object to be used), and Butterfly would feel sad (and she didn't want for anyone to feel sad because of her). So Dune remained quiet and had on what we call a "poker face."

The next morning, the girls still couldn't decide what to do with the sandbox. It didn't help that sand wasn't allowed to grow freely, making it such an unthinkable gift to receive. You must understand that this world, Chrysalis, changes as

you change, so you must be very aware of what you want it to be. That's why the girls were so nervous: *because they didn't know what they wanted from the sandbox.*

The girls couldn't communicate their thoughts or feelings about the sandbox with anyone, let alone each other. So after weeks of worrying, they all took action at the exact same time. This day became forever known in Chrysalis history as the Night Light Day or, simply put, *Night Light*. It was a day full of mistakes, bad decisions, clumsiness, and terror. But for most inhabitants of Chrysalis, *Night Light became the most important day of their lives.*

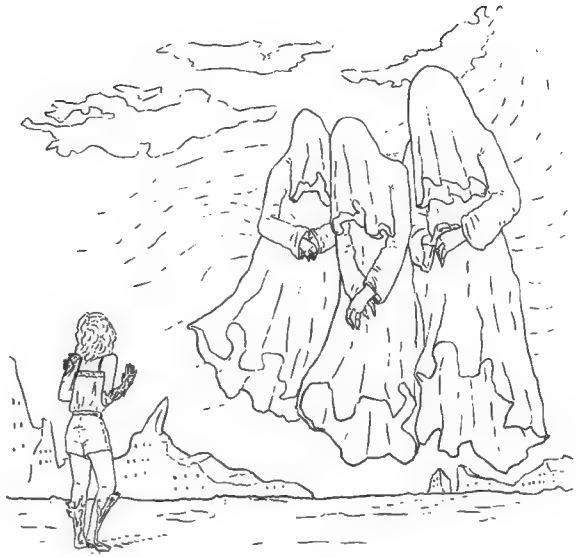
Dune's initial action seemed more like...*inaction*. All of her life, Dune had been keeping all of her weird feelings inside. *Just be a normal girl*, she told herself over and over while staying still and keeping silent.



When the others weren't looking, Asher hid the sandbox. If she did not know how to use it, it could be dangerous. That choice also played a very important role

in *Night Light*.

Fairy's fear got the best of her. She had learned that when you are afraid and have strange thoughts in your head, you must let the Educators know immediately. So she told them about the sandbox.



Their reaction was, predictably, not okay. The Educators pressured her into searching the room so they could take the sandbox for themselves. *What else could Fairy do?* She alone could not say “no” to a direct command. That was something only Sentinel could do and, by all means, she definitely wasn’t Sentinel... *or was she?*

Fairy reluctantly agreed to their demands. One by one, the Educators went into their room. They searched and searched, but couldn’t find the sandbox safely hidden away by Asher. That’s when the Educators started screaming uncontrollably at Fairy about all of her faults and their disappointment. They seemed more and more nervous with each word they spit, almost as if a powerful spell was breaking and they needed to scream painful and unjust words to keep it working.

And then the Educators kept repeating a phrase that rattled within the mind of the girls: “You have forgotten again about your gifts.”

But everything was soon to change.

Now we left out on purpose the actions of Sentinel and Butterfly. That’s because what they did that day is so celebrated on Chrysalis, and so misunderstood by storytellers, that any retelling must be done carefully.

Sentinel overheard the Educators screaming at Fairy, so she jumped to defend her. She literally put her body between Fairy and the screams of the Educators, facing their ongoing violence with a dragon’s bravery.

Meanwhile, Butterfly found the sandbox inside a cloaked drawer in the closet. She was convinced that all of her bad feelings were related to the night it appeared. *Maybe if we liberated the sand, Butterfly wondered, Asher would find some meaning to her story, Dune wouldn’t feel so worried about all of us, and the Educators would stop screaming at Fairy and Sentinel.*

Wait a minute, she realized, what is so special about sand that makes it totally prohibited in Chrysalis?

That’s when the Educators realized what she was holding. They ran to catch her like an insect. Then, as an instinctive response to their violence, Butterfly took the sandbox and threw it at the Educators.



That's when the most incredible thing happened: the sand flew into the air and the five girls began to shine. They suddenly remembered that they knew each other from a long time ago, and that they were all part of the same girl. In the world of Chrysalis, this is a thing that is totally possible. But it was, as many things, a problem for the Educators. *How could the Educators teach them the right way to live if the five girls knew that they were a part of the same person, the same girl, the same mind?*

Night Light

But now it was all known, and the Educators could do little about it. They thought about putting the girls under control again, starting another war, and inventing new ways of lying. But those plans turned to dust the minute they saw the five girls together, their thoughts connected, learning how to talk about all of their feelings. *And the once fearless Educators were really, really afraid.*

So the Educators retreated as far away as they could, and the girls took the sand into their hands.

Butterfly's wings started to glow the full spectrum of a rainbow. She took to the air and her inner light dissolved all of the clouds above, allowing the sky to shine what we now call Night Light. Sentinel fully welcomed this new, ancient sky where she felt free to navigate whenever she wanted. Her dragon wings were always folded until then. But now that she unfurled them and screamed, all of Chrysalis could see her brightness and hear her voice throughout the sky.

Fairy instantly remembered that she could turn sand into trees and water, so she began rebuilding her once beloved forests with the abilities she had. She would eventually perfect this in the days after Night Light. But in that moment, watching that little girl make trees, flowers, and shrubbery sprout from her clumsy hands was breathtaking and magical.

Asher immediately began searching Chrysalis for more sand. She knew the sand would keep the five girls safe, and it was now her responsibility to make sure they remembered to



use sand as freely as they wished.

Dune discovered that, even though she felt like such a boring girl, she was anything but normal. She could feel what the other girls felt in every moment, take care of such mystical beings, and communicate with others like no one else. She also wrote beautiful stories, too. Although Butterfly always tells the Tale, Dune was the girl who wrote the first version. *To this day, she insists that anyone can rewrite the story to make it feel more like their own.*

After Night Light Day, the five girls lived however they felt was best for them, individually changing themselves and Chrysalis forever.

Fairy connected with her thoughts and fears through the sand, uncovering deeper truths about who she was. From her own hands, she continued to create blooming trees and seedlings that filled gaps of barren land throughout Chrysalis. Afterwards, she made cascades and fjords that allowed water



to nourish this new living earth. Thanks to Fairy's released feelings, the forests became even more bewitching and real.

Sentinel became the protector of Chrysalis, navigating the skies to make sure that the remaining Educators could never kill imagination again.

Butterfly continued to fly to keep the cloudy days away, so she needed a lot of rest and caring. She talked to Dune daily, and together they learned how to teach everyone in Chrysalis about communication. This created a new world where people expressed their emotions and helped each other when loneliness loomed. Now that feelings were so important in Chrysalis, Butterfly also taught Dune how to share her own needs, even in moments when inaction seemed like the only



way to cope. *This is still an ongoing process.*

Last, Asher discovered that there were many sand explorers just like her, and that she was one among many.

But Asher knew another thing about the five girls and her place in the world as a sand explorer. After meeting others with a shared destiny, Asher realized that she needed to make sure that the five girls continued to communicate with each other. That was a power they couldn't forget, and Asher's tender relationship with sand was what made that possible in the first place.

A marvelous idea grew in the head of Asher in the years after Night Light: to keep the story alive by creating a place, time, and way to share the five girls' feelings and experiences. She talked about it with the others, and together they built a place once feared and only heard through the Educators' screams: *a Firelight*.

There, they gathered part of their past and their pains, objects and images of what they once were, and gifts they didn't know how to use anymore. Fairy turned it all into wood,

Night Light

and Sentinel and Butterfly searched for a forest glade near a lake to place the now large bundles of kindling. Asher threw sand in the wood, some of which dissolved and transformed into magical Firewood. The rest of the sand elevated in the air and surrounded the Firewood in a perfect sphere. That's always when Dune lit the fire near the lake with a match and a puff. In the air, the glowing sand shined like a thousand fireflies that reflected in the crystalline lake and the eyes of the girls. An almost silent buzz of magical energy touched each one of them, giving them the courage to speak about their most buried feelings.

There they sat around the Firelight, sharing all of their intimate stories and thoughts about being a part of the same Girl. And for their survival and the wellbeing of everyone in Chrysalis, once a year (or whenever they needed to) they would always meet each other by the Firelight to remember *the Tale of the Night Light*.





Neshnaj, the Gentle Grey Giant

written by Xemiyulu Manibusan Tapepechul & illustrated by Ariki Arts

I *always knew I was sovereign.*

From the day my Xaxas brought me to Tal Sital, the earth star, the place where ancestral knowledge is rekindled, I was sure I would always be free to be me.

My name is Neshnaj. My Xaxas, my adoptive humxn parents, named me Neshnaj because I am a grey Maine Coon. They remind me every day that I should honor my Ancestors, so I honor the fact that my Ancestors were Bobcats. I am a gentle grey giant, and I love being free and loved by my Xaxas.

I wear a purple harness made of buffalo hide, which was given to me by Xaxa Acahk, one of the Two-Spirits of Tal Sital. One of Xaxa Acahk's Ancestors made it for their beloved Bobcat, and it was handed down from generation to generation, serving as medicine for the cats. Now, I hold this medicine on my body to guide me on the right path.

There is a place beyond Tal Sital where people like my Xaxas, Two-Spirit people, the First People of The Gift, are not free. Here in Tal Sital, we live in peace. But every so often, my Xaxas must journey into the Colonies for things we do



not have.

“You be good, my baby Neshnaj,” my Xaxa Acahk told me before leaving for the Colonies. Xaxa Acahk reminds me of the Sacred Corn of the North, with pastel skin kissed by the sun, always there to nourish me with their wisdom.

“Be safe, but have fun,” my Xaxa Shuchit added. Xaxa Shuchit reminds me of the Sacred Corn of the South, with golden rays radiating from hxr beauty, shining the right path for me.

I rubbed my nose with their noses and purred. Xaxa Acahk gave my head one more rub before driving away in their carriage. As they pulled away, I tried to chase after them. I had never been in the Holler by myself. I always stayed on our sovereign land. But that day, as I chased after my Xaxas, I

had the urge to go farther. So I kept running, deeper into the Holler.

The Holler is huge. We live between two mountains: Grandmother and Grandfather. Grandmother and Grandfather are steep with big rocks jutting out from the sides, thick with trees that are as old as the First People. Autumn Olive Trees and Multiflora Roses have always grown in thick bunches along their sides. You see, long before my Xaxas were on this land, Grandmother and Grandfather protected the First People. Their paths and thickets guide and look after us.



I was lost. I had run so far from Tal Sital that I wasn't sure where I was anymore. That's when I saw them: another Maine Coon kitty with a loud scream. They were half my size and three times as loud. They looked like me, but with black spots and big green eyes.

"Help! Help!" Tiny Screamer yelled. Three Holler cats were picking on them. One of them was the color of a mountain

lion, with tan fur and a big black nose. The second cat was disheveled, with small twigs and seeds clinging to its brown and white fur. The third cat standing with its chest out was all white—even its little paw beans were white.

“Stop! Leave them alone!” I demanded while pouncing on the two cats attacking Tiny Screamer. They rolled back into the big white one.

The Holler cats just looked at me and laughed. Suddenly, they pounced on me! I was so scared. I had never been in a fight before. They smacked my head with their large paws and bit at my legs. At one point, the tan cat had my stomach in their mouth as the scraggly one pulled my ear. I thought I was done for.

I looked over at Tiny Screamer. They were crying. I knew I couldn’t give up. I mustered all the strength I had and took the chance to charge.

I swiped back at them, landing my scratches onto their fur every time. My left paw went right into the tan one’s eye while my strong tail smacked the face of the unkempt cat. After that, I bodyslammed the white cat while rolling to kick the tan cat in the throat. I maintained focus and kept protecting Tiny Screamer.

“You leave that baby kitty alone! They haven’t done anything to you,” I roared.

“They stole our food, so we’re getting our payback! Stay out of this!” the scraggiest of the Holler cats rumbled in a





low whine, clutching their shoulder.

“You better back off before you get hurt!” the white Holler cat threatened while backing away from me.

That’s when Tiny Screamer crouched down, wiggled their butt to signal a pounce, and bolted in the air. They landed on top of the tan cat’s head, batting their little paws into their head. The tan cat fell to the ground, rolling Tiny Screamer to safety.

“You leave the gentle grey giant alone!” Tiny Screamer roared at the big cats.

The older cats all looked at us. Their looks made it clear that it was time to get far, far away from us. We were not to be

messed with. The Ancestors were on our side and will always be by our side.

With the fight finally over, we were exhausted and in need of shade and water. I remembered seeing a bit of Xister Creek about 50 steps back, shaded by a Willow Tree. I suggested we go there, and Tiny Screamer nodded tiredly. We padded our way there slowly, staying cautious of where we stepped because the hot rocks hurt our paw beans. As soon as we arrived, we plopped our whole bodies in the water and laid in silence. I was too curious about this new kitty to stay silent for long.

“You’re so strong. What’s your name? What pronouns do you use?” I asked.

“Because I am a holler cat, I don’t really have a name,” Tiny Screamer responded. “I use they/them pronouns.”

“Oh, I understand. My name is Neshnaj. I use they/them. It’s great to meet you.”

“You, too. Thanks for your help. I was definitely getting my butt kicked by those cats.”

“They weren’t very nice to you,” I softly meowed while licking my legs clean.

“No, but I did try to take their food away.”

“Still... you’re small. They’re big. They shouldn’t pick on you. We have to protect one another. That’s what community is all about.”

“I never had community,” Tiny Screamer replied. “When

I was very young, I had to find my own way. I don't know if I'll ever find a family."

I remembered what my Xaxas told me about Tal Sital. Our home is a home for the homeless: all Two-Spirits, all Trans people of color, all of Creator's children, the two-legged, the four-legged, the winged—we all have a home at Tal Sital.

"You have a home," I told Tiny Screamer. "You can come live with my family at Tal Sital. We live on sovereign land. All of Creator's children are welcomed! You are my relative. Our Ancestors were bobcats! You belong in my family."

"Do you really think your Xaxas will be okay with that? I don't want to take up space," they said shyly while hiding in their paws.

"I'm positive," I assured them. "We just gotta find our way back. Let's go!"

We ran back toward Tal Sital, toward the path Grandmother and Grandfather Mountain set up for us. The gravel warmed on our tiny paw beans and Brother Wind blew fiercely in our faces.

"This feels really nice!" Tiny Screamer shouted. "Makes me want to run forever!"

"We can keep running," I told them, still running as fast as I could. "Look! It's my Xaxas in their carriage!"

Up ahead, my Xaxas and my Tiex were riding in their blue carriage, slowing down for us to catch up to them. We were almost home.



When we made it back to Tal Sital, Xaxa Shuchit turned off the carriage and my Family stepped out. Tiny Screamer and I walked up to them and meowed our loudest meows.

“Oh my goodness! A baby kitty! Smaller than Neshnaj!” Tiex Cacha cried. “Neshnaj, who is your new sibling?”

“Is that another Maine Coon? Neshnaj! You brought home a Holler relative,” my Xaxa laughed with joy.

“Do you want to stay here and live with us and Neshnaj, little one?” my Tiex offered.

Tiny Screamer hopped up and rubbed Tiex’s nose with their nose, then screamed at the top of their lungs. Jumping around with so much joy, they crawled up Tiex’s leg and onto their shoulders. They rubbed and rubbed and rubbed on their new Xaxa. They were finally home.

“Kunu! What a little rabbit! We’re going to call you Kunu, if that is okay with you,” my Tiex asked.

Tiny Screamer meowed in delight. I walked over to my new sibling. “Kunu! Nice to officially meet you, Kunu.”

Kunu jumped down from their Xaxa to greet me. “It’s nice to be family, Neshnaj.”

Then we rubbed noses. *We were family, and we were sovereign.*





From a Seed Grew a Girl

written by Michelle Gannon & illustrated by Anya L. Archer

In a small clearing lived a Girl who crawled her way out of the soil and mud to explore the world above. Her hair bore her roots, earthy tones of red and brown mixed with thin lines of white plant fibers. She began underground where she grew and grew, making friends with worms and ants until she became angry at her confined space.

She had heard stories of the world above. The earthworms who wriggled their way through the dirt told her of the moon and stars, and the ants who dug themselves little homes in the soil told her about all of the space and room to move. They showed her how to wriggle and crawl until she could move her way through the earth and emerge above ground.

The moon was big and bright, and rain dripped off the treetops overhead. The Girl coughed and took her first breath of fresh air. The new sensation left her feeling anxious and queasy. Her head felt light and her vision blurred. She fell back to the ground, unable to hold herself up. Several moments went by as she laid underneath a tree and slept until the tickle of rain woke her up.

The Girl's eyes twinkled in the moonlight. Even in the darkness of night, everything was new and beautiful. She could now see the surrounding trees as giant monuments of growth



rather than sprawling webs of roots underground. *Who knew it would be so cold?* The worms and ants never mentioned anything about it to her. She shivered, laying on the ground as drops of rain splashed against her skin, washing away the soil and mud that clung to her body.

Why did I listen to worms and ants? she wondered to herself. Curling up under a particularly large tree, she tried to sleep off her nervousness.

The morning sun rose over a distant hill, awakening the Girl. She stood up, steadied herself, and walked towards the warmth of the light overhead. She gently climbed her way through some bushes and flowers, emerging in a small grassy knoll where the sun was no longer blocked by any of the surrounding trees.

The Girl gently laid herself down on a soft patch of grass. Staring up at the blue sky with small puffy clouds sprinkled throughout, she closed her eyes and felt the warm embrace of the sun. She lazily daydreamed in the sun for hours before it started to sink behind a distant hill.

Opening her eyes in the twilight, she noticed something had grown on her! Large, thick, fuzzy leaves with deep green veins now covered her body. She smiled, knowing that she was protected from the cold and rain. The Girl laid back down on her small patch of grass and fell asleep, waiting for the sun to return.

The Girl awoke with a tickle in her throat. Thirst wasn't an unfamiliar concept—she had felt it a few times before—but going out and finding her own water was something new to her. The Girl looked around, trying to find some sort of



clue before spotting a big pink and yellow butterfly on a bushy purple flower at the edge of the clearing.

“Hello!” The Girl spoke to the flying creature. “I was just wondering if you might know where I could find water? I’m awfully thirsty.”

The butterfly flapped its wings and took to the air. It glided towards a small opening that led into the forest. The Girl smiled and ran to catch up. Along her

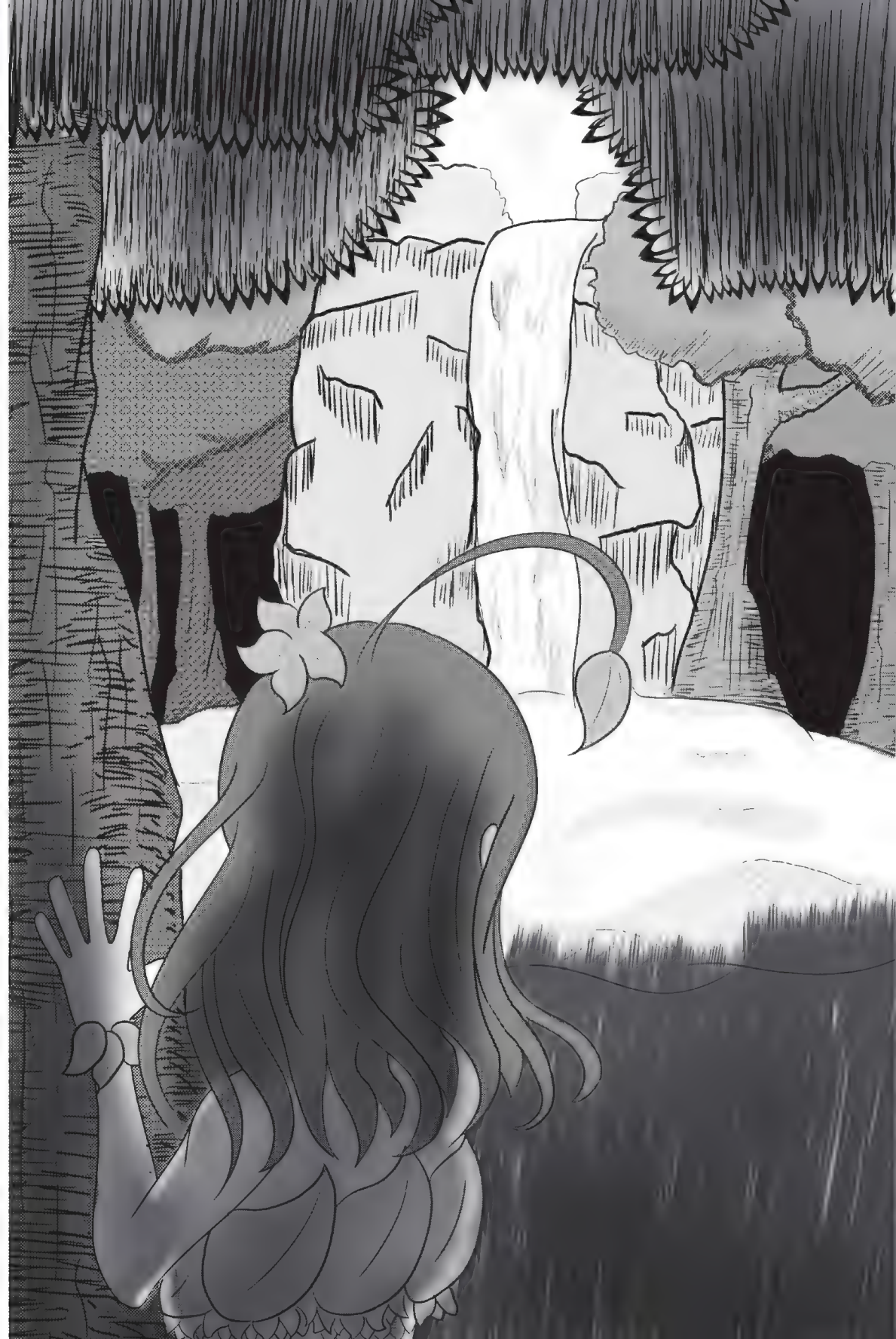
walk, trailing a little behind the butterfly, she saw all of the magnificent things that came from lone roots like her own. Big broad leaves and brightly colored flowers brushed against her as she followed the butterfly across a field and towards a soft bubbling sound.

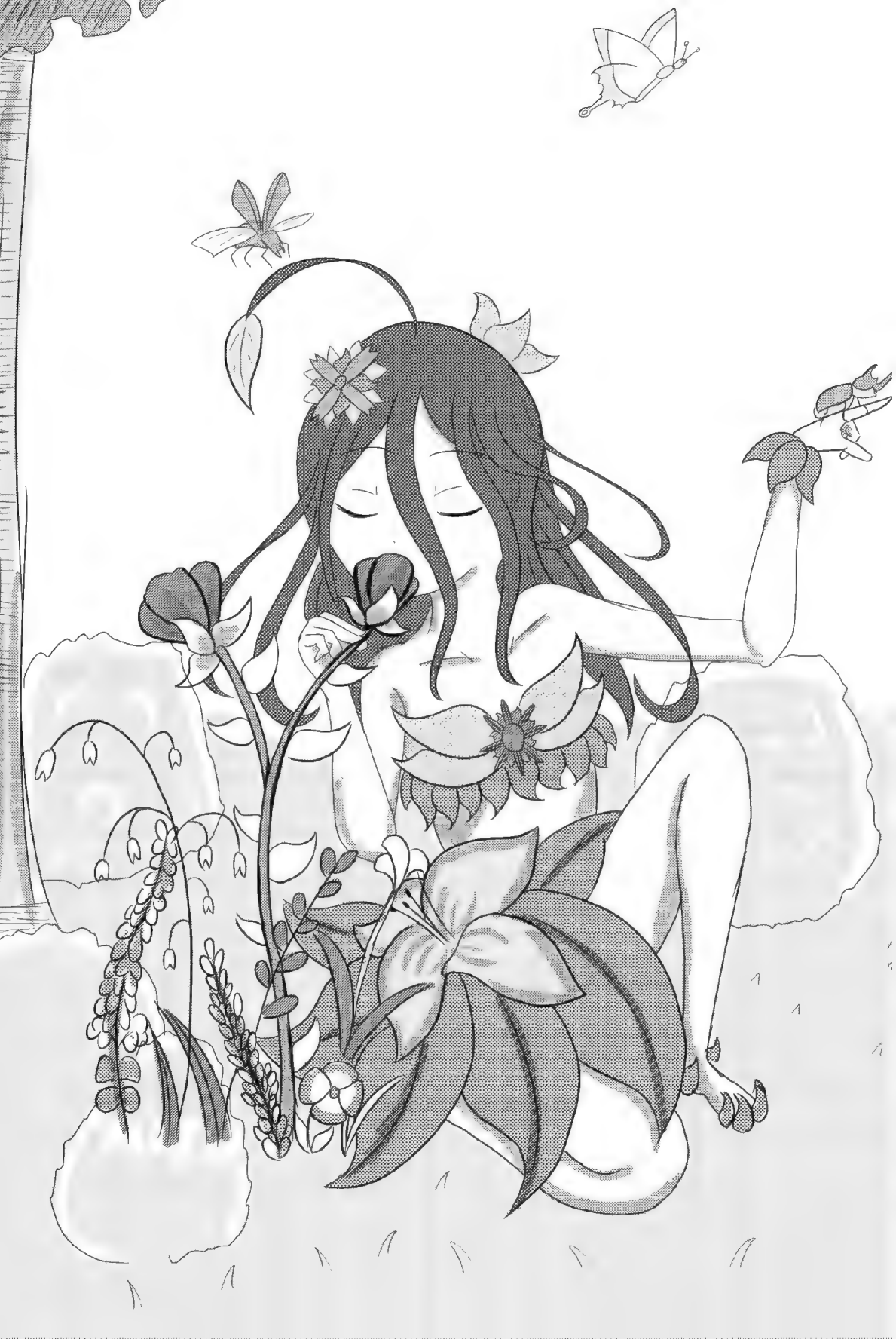
“Oh, thank you. Thank you!” The Girl said. The butterfly floated off to find its next bushy purple flower.

The Girl looked around. Big gray boulders sat atop a waterfall and channeled a small stream over a cliff, spilling water into a pool below. The pool shimmered in the sunlight. From a flat stone, she carefully tiptoed into the pool. As soon as her foot touched the water, the Girl felt a cool liquid rushing throughout her body and quenching her thirst. The tickle in her throat disappeared.

Walking deeper into the pool, she looked down and saw her reflection staring back at her for the first time. The white plant fibers once found all over her head had fallen out, only to be replaced by clusters of bright orange berries that swelled with juice. Her face was full and round and short. Stubby bristles of grass were growing, forming eyebrows and lashes. As her body kept taking in water, her leaves changed, too. Darker green leaves faded to a softer color, revealing pink veins underneath that were pumping liquid throughout her entire body.

Happy with this transformation, she walked back towards her spot of land as stars began to twinkle above her.





The Girl woke up happy on her patch of grass. She spent the next few days skipping around the forest, light as air. Even her hair seemed weightless, resembling a puffy dandelion. She climbed trees from time to time, only taking a few hops up their branches to reach the top. When she was finished, she stepped off and effortlessly floated down like a leaf gliding towards the ground.

The Girl also spent her day conversing with new bugs and plants. The various flora of the forest would bend and twist as she stroked under their leaves, and she always blew them tiny kisses before saying goodbye. She picked up beetles and caterpillars, sharing her favorite places in the forest with them. The beetles wiggled their antennas with understanding, then shared everything about their day. The Girl giggled at the silly predicaments her friends would get themselves in. Every single caterpillar always said the same thing: "I know one day something amazing is gonna happen to me!" After talking to one particularly sad worm, she heard a strange voice, a harsh voice, one she had never heard before. She turned around to see where it was coming from.

The Girl tiptoed closer to the voice, making sure to stay hidden behind the foliage of the forest. There, she saw a little clearing that reminded her of her own. Across the way, there was a small ring of rocks near the center with dried logs sitting inside it.

There they were! The owner of the voice was a strange creature of sorts pacing back and forth while tossing sticks into the ring of rocks, talking to no one. Intrigued, the Girl stepped out of the foliage and towards the creature.

When the creature saw the Girl, they screamed and tripped over a tree trunk, landing on their back. The Girl giggled a little. She confidently offered her hand. In return, the creature just stared, wide-eyed and confuddled.

“What kind of plant are you?” The Girl asked.

The creature said nothing.

Hmmmm, the Girl wondered. The creature with the voice was nothing like anything she had encountered before, but she saw similarities between them. The creature stood on two feet like her, but there were no leaves covering their body. They had two arms, two eyes, and a mouth, also like her. They even had a mound of bright orange fur on top of their head. It reminded the Girl of the color of her own berries.

I’m gonna call you Berry, the Girl thought.

The sunlight was starting to fade. Berry nervously spoke in a language she couldn’t understand.

Berry took a few twigs in their hand. With a sickening crunch, they snapped them, then cast the remains into the ring of rocks. Afterwards, Berry came forward with a small orange can in their hands and dumped its contents onto the dried logs. The smell of the liquid was so vile to the Girl that it made it hard for her to breathe.



Why are they doing this?! The Girl couldn't make sense of Berry's behavior.

She looked over and stood next to Berry. Berry bashed two rocks together near the logs, sending sparks into the ring where they had dumped the harsh-smelling liquid. The sound assaulted the Girl's ears. It only took a few hits before the logs went up in a blaze of oranges and reds.

The fire raged and its flames licked about wildly, even-



tually lashing out at the Girl. She stumbled away from the ring of fire. The Girl had never felt pain like this in her life. She looked down at herself where the flames had touched. Some of her big beautiful leaves had withered away. Their color had been drained out of them, leaving only a charred husk. When she touched the blackened leaves, they crumbled and fell to the forest floor.

Berry stood up triumphantly over the fire with a smile on their face, not realizing what had happened. They looked over at the Girl, who was now gone.

The Girl ran, leaving Berry, the fire, and the pain behind her. She jumped and glided over the roots and stumps of the forest that she knew so well. A beam of light pierced the thick foliage behind her. The voice of Berry called out.

The Girl kept running. She hopped over the hole she crawled out of, foolishly wondering whether she could climb back in and pretend this had all been a dream. Her fingertips grazed the tree she had slept under as she sped towards her little grass patch. The beam of light continued to pursue her, occasionally catching her in its glow. The soft patch of grass that she had slept on many times before calmed her nerves as she tramped across it, towards the waterfall.

For a moment she stopped at the edge of the pool, forgetting that something was chasing her, stunned by the beauty of what lay before her. The moonlight shone down on the water and made it sparkle, bringing it to life. The clear water falling

into the pool below, almost iridescent in the moon's glow, was still bubbling away as it always had. She dipped a toe into the water and felt the burns on her body begin to soothe. This was her favorite place, the one she would tell the beetles and caterpillars about.

There was a sound of snapping branches coming from behind the Girl. She looked and felt the pain of the broken stems that Berry was stomping through. She took off across the pool, lightly skipping across the water as she heard Berry splashing behind her. On the other side of the pool, she grabbed on to handfuls of ivy that clung to the rock wall and flung herself up to the top of the cliff.

Once at the top of the waterfall, the Girl looked down to see Berry struggling to climb up after her. Something came over her, an emotion she had never felt before: **Anger**. *How could this creature who stomps around the forest hurting plants be allowed in such a beautiful place?* It wasn't fair. She loved and cared for this world. *I grew here, and Berry is just breaking their way through my home.*

Berry made their way to the top of the ivy. The Girl kept moving, hopping over the small stream of water that she had only seen before as a gentle waterfall. Berry moved towards her, splashing their feet through the stream. Berry kept trying to talk to her, but all the Girl could hear was the bashing of rocks and the snapping of branches. She turned towards the cliff's edge and looked out over the forest. Her hand instinc-



tively shot out in front of her to tell Berry to stay away. A breeze blew through her fingers on her outstretched hand, and she knew what she would do. A smile crept over her face as she turned to the cliff and glided off the top.

The leaves on her body caught the night breeze, lifting her higher up into the sky. Above the forest, floating in the wind, The Girl could see everything in the glow of the moon: the tree she had slept under her first night above ground, the smoke from the fire, and the clearing where she first felt the sun. The fear faded, and she wondered at the sight of the forest in its entirety. Above the forest that she had spent so much time exploring, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

The Girl landed sometime during the night, waking up just as the sun was reaching over the horizon. The light shone through her eyes, and she sat up and started to look around. There were little flowers scattered around her, deep blue ones, ones that looked like tree bark, and others that looked like the soft, pink bellies of worms. She picked up one of the deep blue flowers and turned it over in her hands. The flower's petals moved limply in the wind. She laid the flower back down and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. There were more flowers, not just around her, but leading out into the forest.

The Girl stood up and walked along the trail of flowers. She gently pushed her way through the trees and bushes. She





could hear something, like soft bubbling water, but there was something else: whispers and giggling. Moving faster and faster, there were more sounds of soft splashes, laughter, and finally, words.

“I hope she wakes up soon. I can’t wait to meet her!”

The Girl peered through the bushes and saw a pool of water with a little stream running into it. There, she found others that looked just like her, playing in the water. Some had thick ropes of ivy draped around their neck and shoulders, some with tiny flowers covering their heads, and some who had skin that looked like tree bark. Somehow, the Girl knew that all of them came from the underground, just like her, and eventually made their way into the sun. *Just like her.*

With a smile on her face, she stepped through the sunlight and into their view.



Melody Song & The Hymns of the Infinite Sadness

written by Amy Eleanor Heart & illustrated by Wriply M. Bennet

Melody Song was always dreaming of being, or becoming, somebody else. Lost in the corners of her mind, she explored all of space and time, searching for a place where she was loved in the real way. Sometimes she found herself living under the sea, diving to unknown depths with dolphins and orcas through crystalline coral covered in glitter and hope. Occasionally she emerged from a dark cavern and screamed, shapeshifting into the sky with giant orange wings, razor sharp talons, and eyes of fiery gold. But in every world she found herself in, something kept quietly whispering to her. *Somebody will eventually see you—all of you.* Someday, Melody knew, she would finally be free.

Melody didn't always feels so alone, though, at least not before her father died. It simply never crossed his mind that she was somehow different from the other children, even after she started closing doors without touching them. When Melody told him she was actually a girl, Papa picked her up into his arms, spun her in the air, and took them both out for chocolate mint ice cream. *I will always love you for whoever you are, however that turns out to be,* he would tell her over

and over. *Forever and always.*

During his last days on Gaia, Papa continued to cherish the bright light he loved within her. “You have a gift that will make sense someday. I promise, Mija,” he whispered with his final breath. “Your gift is your song for this world.”

Sometimes parents are little more than glorified baby-sitters, and occasionally even monsters. But for Melody, Papa was her very best friend. This made life after his departure from the planet more than unbearable. The only saving grace were the stories he left behind, the whispers that never stopped singing inside her heart.

But like all loss, Death has a way of working and wearing on those she leaves behind. An invisible illness soon infected Melody’s limbs—each one stifling, crackling, and eventually shutting down. Her hips shortly followed, and it wasn’t long until she depended on canes and chairs to navigate the Waking World. Melody’s skin turned pale blue, too, and her thick pink hair quickly crumbled away into delicate, wispy whiteness. Slowly, Melody was falling apart. *Slowly, she was dying.*

Nobody could explain what was happening to Melody. Appointment after appointment, she was shuffled from one room to the next, carried from bed to bed and injected with strange purple potions that smelled of flesh. She tried to object, over and over, but her screams were left unheard. Her Medical Team was too fascinated with her spacesuit to remember that

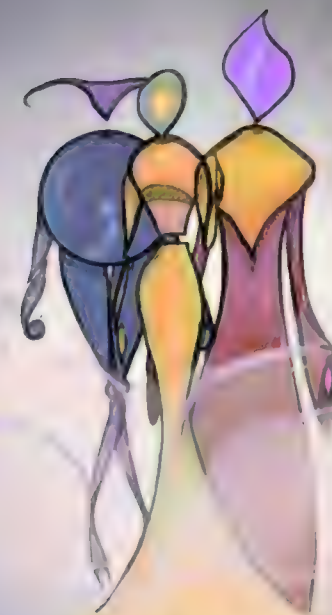
she was still on the inside.

Melody soon found herself locked inside a basement at the northeastern corner of a country we once called Amerikkka. Oversized purple electrodes were nestled underneath her ears, and strangers in white masks and yellow gloves kept cutting off what was left of Melody's hair for "testing." Fifteen thick metallic wires dangled from her shoulders, wrists, and knees, each cable pumping and replacing her shimmering blood with a white, milky substance that eventually turned back into gold. Once Melody heard the Scientists say it was a cure for... something. She couldn't understand them that well, not like she used to. Her dreamworld was beginning to take over, and this was not a bad thing. Those travels across space and time were the only solace and peace she could find.

At least until the Hymns arrived.

The Hymns initially came to Melody in whispers, quiet sonnets that only she could hear. In the corners of her consciousness, she occasionally noticed bright bubbles of lavender and blue swirl, then burst into what felt like eternity. Within those fading colors, a somber, sweet song would rise that Melody somehow knew but couldn't remember. There was never an explanation for either the song or bubbles; no rhyme or reason for appearing to her at all.

But soon after, the Hymns entered her dream life. While



sitting on the edge of Orion's Belt, her favorite place to nap and chart another flight into the unknown, an explosion rumbled that lit up the endless starry skyline. There, the lights and their accompanying song emerged from a distant nebula, but for longer this time, and louder, too. It was not long until she couldn't travel anywhere across SpaceTime without hearing the Hymns and their words that were now more than apparent.

*Whispers of the Lifestream
Swimming through your heart.
The Sacred Light within you
Shall never fall apart.
Remember...
Remember...
You are
Love.*

In the months that followed, Melody surrendered herself to the Hymns of the Infinite Sadness. Just like before, she swam under the Sea, soared across the Stars, and stretched her wings into the Great Beyond. But something inside her was changing. Each time the Hymns harmonized, Melody remembered more and more of her life with Papa, and it didn't feel like such a distant dream anymore. *The love he had poured inside her was clearly still there, buried in her lifestream, waiting to*

surface when the time was just right.

Eventually, Melody found herself humming along with the serenade of the Hymns. Many years had passed since she last tried to speak, so it caught her by surprise how comforting hearing herself actually was. She started talking to the Hymns, too, mostly about her life before she got sick. Atop her favorite blueberry trees on Jupiter and Mars, Melody would lie down, stretch out her wings along their thin but firm branches, and share everything with the world above.

As the sky faded into starlight, she spoke of her favorite memories with Papa, the stories that would make her laugh and cry all the same: the way he would gently pick her up as a toddler by the back of her overalls, the fresh bottles of water waiting for her after school in his messy beige sedan, and that contagious, heartfelt laughter that reminded Melody so much of her own. The Hymns quietly nodded along, painting with light across the stars. Poppy fields, baseball hats, marshmallow chickens, and chocolate donuts breathtakingly took to the sky as Melody remembered everything her father was, to both her and the world they shared together.

On those treetops, Melody began to feel something other than the Infinite Sadness for the first time since Papa left Gaia. Some would call it love, but Melody knew it was deeper than that. Somehow, somewhere, she could feel her ancestors holding space for her to unfold and explore everything that she was and ever will be. *Perhaps her father's passing was only*



the beginning instead of the end.

The Hymns made their final appearance to Melody in a dream far beneath the planet's mantle. Sharp slabs of peridot impaled the floor of a square ruby cavern, and a nearby ocean of magma illuminated fresh wounds split across Melody's back. Pools of blood dripped down her curling wings, soaking her ragged white dress in crimson red and shimmering gold. Crumbled up in a ball, Melody coughed and wheezed and coughed again. No matter how much she cherished the whispers of the Hymns and the perfect memories of her Papa, her dream life could not protect her any longer. She broke into tears and sobbed until the room was flooded with nothing but her loss.

As usual, the lights of the Hymns emerged from the Great Beyond. But instead of singing their song, the lavender and blue bubbles shapeshifted into an eight-foot-tall doorway lined by a bright amber shimmer. Melody looked at the ground and noticed her tears and blood merging, together forming a shiny rainbow river inching its way past the peridot spears and toward the newly formed exit.

She slowly stood up, digging her talons into the walls to stay upright. Cautiously, Melody stepped towards the doorway, impaling each peridot spear she passed along the way. After seventy-five minutes and too many breaks to spare, she made it.

Up close, Melody could make out what the doorway was: a glowing wooden frame featuring detailed carvings of symbols she couldn't understand. The door itself, however, was missing. In its place floated a curtain of sorts, a curtain that was painted exactly like the cavern's ruby walls. She would have never guessed that the hidden "door" was anything but rocks if there hadn't been a cold breeze slightly pushing the fabric forward and back and forward again.

Melody reached for the curtain door. Instead of being sharp and hard, the crystallized fabric was soft, almost like cotton. There was a light behind it and a familiar song playing beyond the sharp buzz. The lyrics were the same as the Hymns of Infinite Sadness, but an orchestra of bass, winds, and strings filled all of the gaps she once missed. The sound carried her forward, moving her feet underneath the curtain and into a new world.

When she emerged, Melody found herself just above ground. She was still on Gaia—a different Gaia from another timeline. The sun was out, showcasing an immersive blue sky that Melody had heard rumors about in middle school. In the distance, she could see the tips of the big city she grew up in. The city was abandoned now; its towering skyscrapers withering away and covered in thousands of majestic gardens. Tall fields of sunflowers and pink poppies covered the grassy knoll in front of her, and children from every color of the rainbow with wings of butterflies and ravens were run-



ning and flying anywhere, everywhere they could. She spotted villages in the distance, too, small huts with hundreds of human and non-human hybrids who were gathering, singing, and looking directly at her. They waved excitedly, each holding up a stone of light that reverberated, creating the orchestral sound that brought Melody here in the first place.

She waved back.

Where am I? Melody wondered. *Am I finally...?*

She looked at her hands. The pale blue pigmentation that haunted her skin for years was now gone, illuminating her favorite shade of brown that she was. Melody smiled for the first time since her Papa died.

I am, she knew. Home.

An unexpected gust of wind swished past Melody's right side. She instinctively turned to follow its lead, but immediately stopped upon feeling the sweetest, warmest brush against her left shoulder.

"It's time, Mija," a familiar voice whispered. "Open your eyes."

Melody blinked. She found herself sitting atop a rolling hillside in the middle of nowhere, at least nowhere she had seen before. Ahead of her, three setting suns eclipsed the horizon where a giant oak tree stood. The tree seemed older than time itself.

"I always wanted to take you here," the familiar voice con-



tinued. "This was my favorite place while I was living on this planet. *If I had found the time to take you...*"

Melody's chin began to quiver uncontrollably, her wings violently shaking, her eyes widening brightly. She looked to the left. A translucent figure of light sat beside her, flickering intermittently until reaching its final form. There smiled her Papa, not a day older than thirty-two, staring into the sunsets. His curly hair was bushy, black, and thick, exactly like she remembered.

"Mi dulce estrellita, how long you have journeyed," Papa softly smiled, barely holding back his tears. "It is so good to see you again."

Melody collapsed into her father's arms, throwing Papa momentarily off balance. He held her tightly to his frame, transferring all of the weight she had been carrying across the Universe. Curling into his lap, Melody cried and cried. *She never thought she would feel this safe again.*

"You were, and always shall be, the light of my life," Papa spoke while gently brushing Melody's hair, carefully lifting each strand out of her eyes. "I only wanted you to feel loved for everything that you are. That was, that is, your birthright."

The suns faded behind the rolling hills and two moons soared into the sky. Thousands of stars emerged, carefully sprinkling themselves across the twilight above. Papa's eyes met a sparkling ball of light with a train of rainbow dust speeding through the air. Melody saw it, too, but her tears made



the shooting star difficult to follow.

“But my story on Gaia is over, and what is left of me now lives in you.” Papa smiled again, tucking Melody’s hair behind her ears. “There are others who need you, Mija, others who are just as spectacular and strange and wonderful as my little star. This is your gift, your responsibility, on Gaia. You must sing the song that will lead you, everyone... Home.”

Home. Tears rushed hard down Melody’s face, each drop curling into a million streams of iridescent sparkling gold. All of her life, Melody dreamed of the day she’d finally return to a world she had never known but remembered she belonged. Every night, she wished upon a star for the map back there, hoping for an answer she never expected. Finally, here it was, right in front of her: *the first human she had ever loved in this lifetime.*

“Someday, we will be together again...when the time is right.” Papa softly cupped his hand over her cheek. Melody’s tears swam between his fingers and down his arm, leaving behind a trail of stardust. “For now, I will be right here in your heart. Forever and always.”

Melody closed her eyes. A warm, gentle breeze gracefully lifted her out of Papa’s arms, quietly guiding her body and wings towards the midnight sky. Melody smiled for the second time since her Papa left. She looked upward as a bright shower of magic erupted from the grass below, rocketing her into the stars at twice the speed of light.

Visions of stories never told flooded the corners of her mind. Cinematic projections of babies being born, battles bravely faced, and losses barely held played themselves out as she spun faster and faster towards the end of the Universe.

"You are ready, little star," spoke a thousand whispers of her ancestors. "*Open your eyes.*"

"CODE RED! CODE RED! CODE RED!"

Melody jerked her head forward and looked around. She found herself dangling twenty feet in the air, just short of a ceiling that definitely wasn't there before. Below, a group of strange white men with wet trousers scrambled frantically for their clipboards and pencils. Wires connected her browning skin to 126 different gadgets laying on the checkered floor. They were either smoking or off. Her journey back to the Waking World had shorted everything out.

Melody cracked her knuckles for the first time in years. She screamed in agony. The pain was almost unbearable, but not enough to stop her. In some ways, it felt good. *She was alive.*

"CODE RED! THE BLUEBIRD HAS AWAKENED. I REPEAT, THE BLUEBIRD HAS AWAKENED," the Scientists frantically cried on their phones. "WE NEED GROUND ASSISTANCE, NOW!"

She grinned. A ball of light quickly gathered on Melody's nose, then fired into both of her eyes. One by one, an invi-

ble force swiftly unhooked every single cable attached to her body. Meanwhile, her favorite pair of dragon wings ripped through her skin and fully extended across the room. Some of the men had found weapons of their own, but their barrels were trembling in fear.

“MOVE,” her voice confidently thundered.

A surge of power erupted from Melody’s hands, then fired directly at the Scientists. Sharp bolts of electricity crisped their stained pants into thick black dust, leaving them humiliated and cold. Those who somehow survived the first blast bolted to the nearest exit, screaming to be spared from the oncoming storm that was Melody Song.

But Melody was not interested in revenge, no matter how much those stupid white men deserved it. She swiftly landed on the floor, impaling her sharp talons into the linoleum. Scanning the ceiling, Melody’s eyes searched her internal compass for direction. *There*, she promptly knew. *Right there, towards Western Sky.*

Without looking down, Melody pointed precisely into the ground with her left index finger. The ground immediately collapsed, swallowing everything on the floor except for her. The room suddenly went dark, and a crimson light penetrated its remaining walls. This was temporary, however, as a giant earthquake interrupted the momentary peace. Boulders from the world above smashed below, pounding the remaining Scientists and shattering what was left of the laboratory and



its work forever.

Melody glared, standing valiantly in the ashes of the aftermath. A glimmer of daylight danced from above, meeting the half of her face still hidden in the shadows. She looked into the Sun with fierce determination, then kneeled to the ground below. The dust had barely settled before Melody leapt feverishly into the air and back to the sky.

She continued to rise upward, past the city skyline and above the clouds. Looking at the Earth below, Melody's heart



crumbled. It had been decades since she had last seen the Waking World, and capitalism had ravaged what was left of her. Enormous fires stretched across all continents in her line of sight, oceans engulfed land that once easily sprawled, and everything was brown. No more rolling hillsides, no more flowers, no more light, no more love.

She furrowed her eyebrows in anger. A loud explosion burst from her ankles, skyrocketing Melody faster and fiercer towards the moon. A sparkling trail of rainbow stardust spiraled behind her, leaving a glowing record of her journey for the world that was watching below.

For the planet. For our children. For my father. FOR ME.
As Melody approached the thermosphere, her wings unfurled even further, expanding four times their original size. Pulling back like a parachute, Melody immediately halted her upward ascent and gracefully floated just above the Earth. She closed her eyes and listened, searching inside for the words to save the planet.

First, there was nothing but the drumbeat of her own heart. *One, two, two. One, two, one.* But soon that changed, and Melody could make out a series of faint whispers echoing around her. This was also shortlived as the whispers quickly evolved into screams, terrors coming from deep within Gaia's core. Beneath the rhythm, the cries, and her tears, she remembered everything.

With all of her love, all of her hope, and the rest of her life, Melody's corporeal body exploded, then shape-shifted into a million balls of light. Her stars promptly took to different positions across the planet as an outline of her spirit continued to float quietly above. She opened her eyes. Raising her hands high, the light of Melody Song belted the song that had kept her safe for so many years.

*Whispers of the Lifestream
Swimming through your heart.
The Sacred Light within you
Shall never fall apart.*

Numerous flashes of light erupted across Gaia's atmosphere, each one leaping into the stars to meet Melody's song. In a matter of moments, there were millions of lost children floating next to her, each with a unique color combination that somehow matched hers. They joined her choir and began to sing in perfect harmony, harnessing the power of each other and the planet below.

*Now it's okay to be scared,
My sweet and darling star.
We are here to guide you
And protect your world from afar.*

The planet's mantle cracked open, unleashing a stream of lavender and blue light from its core. The colors quickly gathered across all of Gaia as Melody and her choir continued to sing.

*The Great Love is behind you,
Her wings are holding you close.
She is shining her light here,
And holding you from the Great Beyond.*

Melody continued singing with all of her heart, but her inner light was quickly fading fast. Slipstreams of her spirit began to dance across the stars and join the children behind

her. Their bodies glowed brighter and brighter as an orchestra of bass, winds, and strings from the Great Beyond joined their prayer.

Remember... Remember...

You are loved.

Remember... Remember...

You are love.

A giant flash exploded from the heart of Gaia, enfolding the entire solar system with a warm white light. Melody's trembling knees buckled, forcing her astral body to tumble backwards and fall. Faster and faster she dropped, right into the Earth, directly through the mantle, straight past the core, and all the way across the Universe. The remainder of her life force swept into the solar winds as Melody Song took her final breath.

I'm coming home, Papa, she hoped. I'm coming home.

The Sun rose across a glimmering blue sky. Winged creatures soared over an immersive green ocean in search of a healthy breakfast. Orcas and dolphins sang joyously from the sea as their dear friends from above crossed the shoreline and into the evergreens. After perching atop a great oak tree, the eldest hugged her ten grandchildren before sending them off and into an open field. Alone, she stared up into

the Great Beyond, remembering a time when her beloved Gaia almost died. Her greying pink hair and torn orange wings still showed the scars of a life she once lived but barely survived.

A gentle brush of wind swept past her shoulder, a feeling she had never forgotten from so long ago. She turned her head, then smiled.

“Es la hora, mi amada estrellita,” her favorite voice whispered, holding her close to his heart. “It’s time. *Open your eyes.*”





The Unicorn of the Sea & Me

written by Jun Almar'a & illustrated by Clara Emiliana

Boxes are convenient to store things in. For example, one can put their winter clothes in boxes during the summer time, or have a box full of seashells from all the beaches one has visited. I myself have several boxes full of stuff that I don't need, I do need, and I may one day need. I also label my boxes so I know what kinds of things are in each of them. While it makes sense to put things in boxes, it does not, however, make sense to put people in boxes.

But this is exactly the situation Arjuna found herself in. She was born into a town of boxes, boxes that had everything from computer wires to tomatoes to people; and everyone was put into boxes from the minute they were born. Each box also had labels, so many that most people were merely labels on boxes. Nobody got a choice how their box was first labelled, and it always started with one of these two words: 'Boy' or 'Girl.'

As early as Arjuna could remember, she was put into a box that said 'Boy.' No choice, just 'Boy.' And throughout the years, Arjuna found out she was quite good at being a 'Boy'—even though she didn't really like it at all. The more her box got labels that 'Boys' usually got, the more Arjuna realized that she was nothing like the 'Boy' everyone thought she was.

Arjuna knew that she liked being a girl, but she also knew that she was not like the 'Girls.' It always seemed so easy for the labelled 'Girls' to be girls because they just had to rely on their boxes to tell them so. When Arjuna tried, she found it much, much harder. There were also no girls she knew without 'Girl' on their box, and the ones with the labels were not at all accepting of somebody being a girl without a label.

Arjuna really didn't like other people deciding who she should be because of a label someone else put on her box. She was an outsider in this town. She was neither a 'Boy' as her label said, nor was she a girl in the same way that the 'Girls' were because she didn't have that label.

Arjuna knew that she was her own kind of Girl.

Feeling out of place was normal to Zahra (or Ziggy, as they preferred), as normal as walking or having hands. When they were born, Ziggy was put into a box that said 'Girl.' It was fine; they didn't really mind when people called them a girl, but 'Girl' wasn't everything that they were (and they didn't really get along with the 'Girls' anyway).

The 'Girls' didn't really understand what Ziggy was like. To everyone else, Ziggy looked like they were always flustered and shy. Ziggy had put on the same labels that their friends had on their boxes, but they didn't look quite right, nor fit quite right on Ziggy's box. Despite trying very hard to hide it, Ziggy had always been a little ...*different*.



What Ziggy wanted more than anything was to belong somewhere, to have a family. So far, they had only been able to do that by going along with the labels that other people had put on them.

On top of everything else, Ziggy had to deal with their horn. *This multicoloured thing on my forehead just keeps making trouble for me*, Ziggy thought on more than one occasion. *Why am I the only one who has to worry and work so hard to fix their box?*

Ziggy always had to be aware of the holes that they were accidentally making. Their horn would poke holes in their box, and Ziggy would have to quickly patch it up before anyone noticed. Not that anyone ever did; they were all in boxes themselves.

The only good thing about Ziggy's horn happened when it became wet. If they listened carefully, Ziggy could hear the most beautiful music. One of Ziggy's favourite activities was to take long walks in the summer rain. The music was familiar, warm, and the one thing that always made them feel at peace.

Arjuna loved to take long walks, but having taken pieces out of her box brought her a lot of unwanted attention. The summer nights were Arjuna's favourite time to walk because there were very few people around. More specifically, she loved the time just before dawn; the way the sunlight crept over the horizon, slowly at first, and then almost all at once,

it felt like the world was completely lit up.

She was on one of her usual walks by the lake, listening to the stars calling her to come back, the same as every other night. As the sunlight started to thin the mist over the lake, she noticed that, for once, she was not alone. Over by the other side of the lake was a person with a horn! The most beautiful rainbow-coloured horn attached to a person trying desperately to make it fit into their box. It was the first time that Arjuna had seen someone else having trouble fitting into their box.

Ugh, not again, Ziggy thought to themselves. Their box was full of circular former holes, patched up with tape and overlapping pieces. *What's one more, I guess?* It was good that no one was around in the morning; they could just patch it up at home.

"Excuse me?" inquired Arjuna, giving Ziggy the biggest shock of their life. Spinning around, Ziggy found themselves standing in front of a person with pieces of their box missing!

Here I am trying to get my box under control, and here is this person taking pieces out of hers, Ziggy wondered.

"Are you a Unicorn?" gasped Arjuna, struck with wonder.

"No, I'm normal," replied Ziggy, folding their arms to protect themselves from the stranger in front of them.

"No, No, No! You're not! You're not normal at all," squealed Arjuna, gleefully grinning from ear to ear. "You're like me!"



Ziggy was taken aback. In a town full of boxes and labels, meeting someone who is unapologetically themselves can be quite a shock. Here, at the break of the morning, Ziggy met a person who made them feel completely and instantly at ease simply by being authentically foolish.

Ziggy pinched the bridge of their nose with a sigh, unable to contain their smile.

“What a weirdo,” said Ziggy, rolling their eyes.

“**H**urry up, slowpoke. Stop dragging your feet.”

Arjuna sighed. She really didn’t want to be here. *Shopping*. Don’t get me wrong, she loved shopping—just not in front of people. Except since their first meeting, Arjuna couldn’t help but to give in to Ziggy. There was no one else that made her

feel more like she belonged. The stars were where she came from. *With Ziggy, she had family.*

“Alright! I’m coming, I’m coming.”

That morning Ziggy had decided to help Arjuna find her first dress, and so shopping they went. This was all very new for Ziggy: taking the lead, making decisions, and having someone follow them, too! Almost without realizing it, spending time with Arjuna had made Ziggy feel more self-assured.

“Follow your horn,” Arjuna kept telling Ziggy.

And the more they followed it, the clearer they could hear its music.

Ziggy and Arjuna buzzed in and out of shops like two bees hopping from flower to flower, carefree as could be, and then *SPLASH!*

Sometimes a fraction of a second is enough to be pulled from a warm golden glow to being drenched by an icy slushy mess. Arjuna’s heart sunk.

An electric blue, sweet and sour glacier seeped slowly through Arjuna’s hair. It slid down her face and neck, and froze her right to the spot where she was standing. The stinging icy trail was soothed by the warm salty tears that flowed from her eyes, and the only thing she could hear was a roar of laughter coming from all around.

“Careful, Zahra,” cackled Nazzo, a black-haired ‘Girl’ who was ‘friends’ with a lot of people, but nice to none of them. She stood in front of the group of bullies as their leader. “If



you stand too close to the weirdo, you might get wet.” The chorus of bullies sniggered in approval.

Ziggy’s eyes burned with a fire that had been growing inside them. Their horn glowed like smouldering embers as they stepped up to Nazzo.

“My name is Ziggy,” they thundered, “and believe me, you won’t like me when I’m wet.”

The bullies were stunned stiff. They had never seen the person they called Zahra look so....*formidable*. In no way did the ‘Girls’ expect timid, flustered Ziggy to talk back to them, let alone stand up for the outsider Arjuna. The chorus looked to Nazzo for what to do, but she couldn’t take her eyes off the Ziggy in front of her.

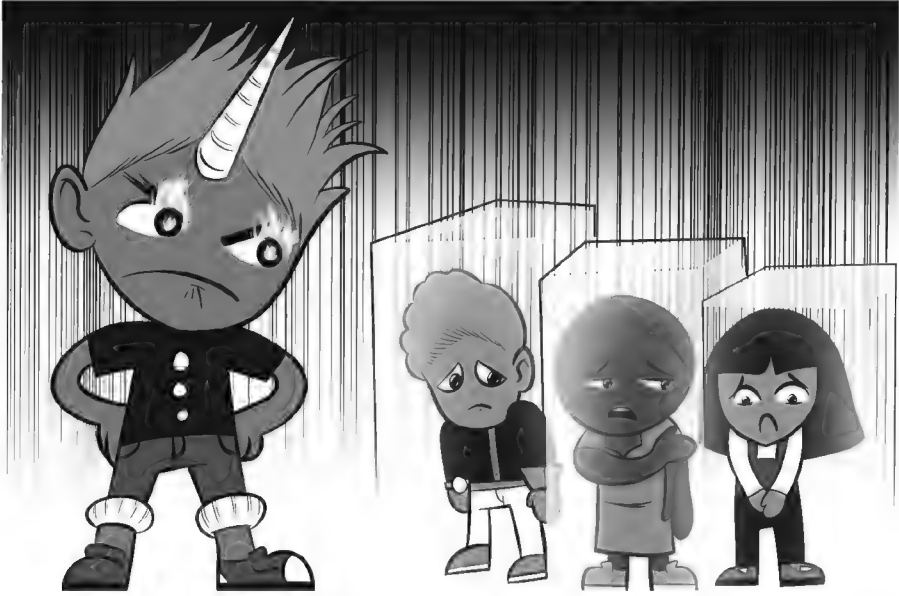
The bullies and the crowd around Arjuna faded as she focused on Ziggy’s back. This was the first time that she did not have to find the strength to stand up for herself. It made her feel secure that she would be protected from someone trying to hurt her.

Ziggy spun around, grabbed Arjuna’s hand, and looked deep into her black eyes.

“You are an incredible weirdo, and that makes you beautiful. Like a dove.” Ziggy paused, thinking what to say next. “A weirdove.”

Arjuna’s shock gave way, gradually replaced with confusion.

“You’re a weirdove,” Ziggy repeated with a straight face



before bursting out with laughter and running away from the bullies, pulling Arjuna behind them.

“Comeeee innnnn,” sang Ziggy in response to Arjuna’s knock.

The weeks after the incident were a lot harder for Ziggy than for Arjuna. Unfortunately, Arjuna was well used to situations like these since she had stopped trying to fit into her box. Ziggy, on the other hand, worked really hard to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Standing up for Arjuna in front of everyone had put an end to their carefully crafted image. They now received a lot of unwanted attention from the other children, which weighed them down like a heavy cloud.

Ziggy seems much better today, Arjuna thought to herself. Indeed, Ziggy had made some important decisions about



their life, and Arjuna felt that something was different. But when Arjuna walked into their room, the first thing she saw was a rack full of dresses, and her apprehension melted away.

“Surprise!” announced Ziggy. “Welcome to your own personal dress store!”

Arjuna was stunned, which was not a new experience when it came to being friends with Ziggy.

“Stop standing there like a weirdo. Hurry up and try one on, June.” Ziggy was bouncing out of their skin with excitement.

One moment, Arjuna was standing in Ziggy’s doorway, jaw dropped. The next, she was stepping into a lavender dress that made her feel like a princess. Time was moving much too quickly and standing still, all at once. The dress held Arjuna tightly and hugged her warmly, liberating her from

the labels on her box that she never had any say in.

Although the stars always beckoned, nagging her to come home, in this moment, Arjuna didn't need to go anywhere. She was finally happy. *She was home.*

Ziggy held Arjuna tightly as the emotion overtook her. Happy tears, relieved tears, grateful tears, they all flowed without her control.

"June, I'm leaving. This is my goodbye present to you."

Ziggy felt Arjuna get calmer and calmer, but she still said nothing.

"Something happened when I got upset at those bullies," Ziggy continued, "I felt something come alive inside me. I am bold. I'm fierce. I felt like myself, my real self."

Ziggy waited for some sort of a reaction from Arjuna, their gaze slipping outside the window while she continued her silence. Arjuna's arms moved from returning Ziggy's hold to creating space between the two friends.

"I heard a call from the ocean, June. The music...it showed me the way home, to my family."

Ziggy looked down, unsure of what to expect, only to find a beaming Arjuna looking up at them. The shock of the news had snapped Arjuna out of her crying fit, and all she was focused on now was Ziggy.

"I'm so happy for you, Ziggy," she blubbered between the tears. "When do we leave?"



The music in their head was clearer and more beautiful than it ever had been. Ziggy knew that they were finally reaching home. The two friends journeyed out of the dreary town that once held them in box-shaped cages, for the first and the last time. The ocean was their destination and Ziggy's horn their rainbow compass, affirming their freedom and confirming the end. Arjuna knew that at the end of their adventure, she would have to let Ziggy go.

As Arjuna followed Ziggy up the last incline, she could hear the crashing of water and music. Her face lit up with wonder as the most beautiful music she had ever heard washed over her wave after wave.

"June! You hear it too, don't you?" asked Ziggy. "That's from my family."

Tears of joy and relief flew off their face as Ziggy grabbed Arjuna's hand and ran. They ran towards the clearing, past

the trees, closer to the source of the music.

Out in front of her, Arjuna saw the land suddenly end, giving way to an endless ocean of water.

“You are a unicorn! I knew it!” screamed Arjuna excitedly.

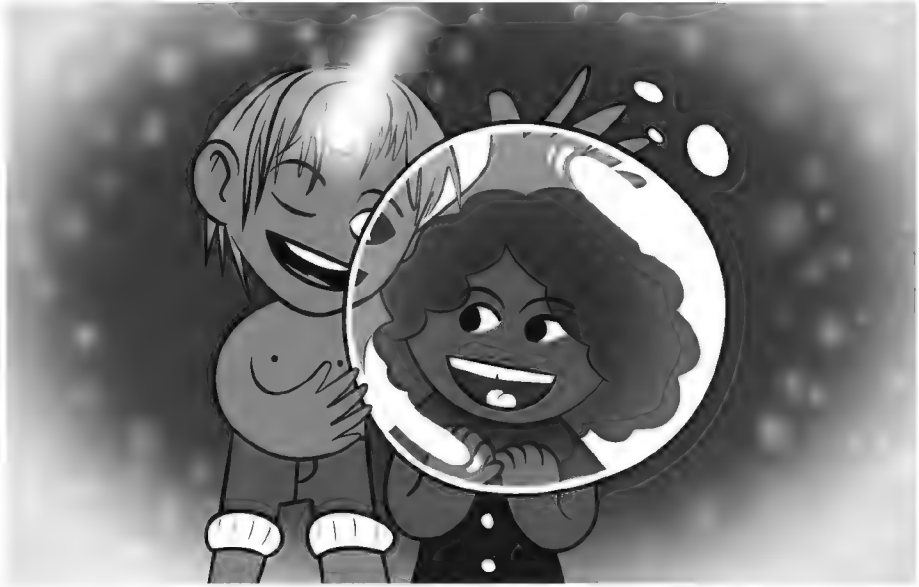
Approaching the cliff, she watched through the crystal clear surface as five incredible swimmers with horns weaved in and out of each other. Their glowing and colourful horns created trails of spiralling water behind them, silver braids shimmering in the blue ocean.

Arjuna stared at Ziggy’s back as they paused at the edge of the cliff. Ziggy turned back to flash that electric, fearless smile Arjuna had come to know so well. Arjuna held that moment with intense focus. She memorized the curves of Ziggy’s face, the colours of their horn, and the curls in their hair. Ziggy was the first person for whom Arjuna was June, and she never wanted to let go of that feeling.

In an instant, Ziggy jumped powerfully into the air and off the cliff. They disappeared quickly into the dark ocean, off to join their family: *the unicorns of the sea*.

Standing at the spot where she last saw Ziggy, Arjuna looked towards the evening stars. Before she met Ziggy, the stars had been her source of comfort and belonging. In a town where she was born into being an outsider, the stars were always Arjuna’s companion when she was alone. She knew that among the stars, there was a place where she wasn’t an outsider, and it called to Arjuna in the same way that the uni-





corns called to Ziggy. After a deep breath in and out, Arjuna made up her mind. She looked once more to the stars, telling them that she'd be home soon but not yet.

There must be others who don't fit into those deplorable boxes, she thought to herself, soaking in the brief taste of freedom. Maybe I can find other children and see if they want to be box-free, like me!

As Arjuna turned her back to the ocean and took her first steps back towards the town, she felt a tap on her shoulder. There stood Ziggy, hair slicked back and drenched, horn gleaming in the last rays of the setting sun, holding what looked like a solid bubble.

"Oh June, did you actually think I would leave without you, weirdo?" they said, almost entirely with an epic roll of their eyes, beaming from ear to ear.

“Never,” I replied.

Thematic Index

What is a thematic index?

Amy and I wanted to provide an alternative way of reading the magic within *99% Chance of Magic*. Growing up, we both struggled with finding healthy stories about transformation, magic, love, and belonging. Here in this index, we have gone ahead and highlighted what kids might be looking for. We also wanted to give a warning about some themes in this book that are never easy (bullying, grief and death), yet still handled beautifully.

May the stories found in this book nourish your heart and feed your imagination.

Coming Out

These stories are about characters revealing truth to themselves or others.

- A Rightful Queen ... p. 33
- A Shapeshifting Spell ... p. 11
- 99% Chance of Magic ... p. 18
- The Sisters from the Stars ... p. 45
- Valara and the Magic Eater ... p. 63
- Melody Song ... p. 161

Being Yourself

These stories involve characters fiercely staying true to themselves.

- Night Light ... p. 115
- A Rightful Queen ... p. 33
- My Story, the Wolf ... p. 96
- A Shapeshifting Spell ... p. 11
- 99% Chance of Magic ... p. 18
- Can't Stop the Princess ... p. 81
- The Sisters from the Stars ... p. 45
- Unicorn of the Sea and Me ... p. 187
- Melody Song ... p. 161

Shapeshifting

These stories involve characters shapeshifting
into new expressions of being.

- Night Light ... p. 115
- A Shapeshifting Spell ... p. 11
- Can't Stop the Princess ... p. 81
- From a Seed Grew a Girl ... p. 143
- The Sisters from the Stars ... p. 45
- Unicorn of the Sea and Me ... p. 187
- Melody Song ... p. 161

Reclaiming

These stories involve characters taking
back and owning their power.

- Night Light ... p. 115
- My Story, the Wolf ... p. 96
- A Shapeshifting Spell ... p. 11
- 99% Chance of Magic ... p. 18
- The Sisters from Stars ... p. 45
- Can't Stop the Princess ... p. 81
- Unicorn of the Sea and Me ... p. 187
- Valara and the Magic Eater ... p. 63
- Melody Song ... p. 161

Community

These stories involve characters being part of a community who love and support them, however they turn out to be.

- Night Light ... p. 115
- A Rightful Queen ... p. 33
- My Story, the Wolf ... p. 96
- 99% Chance of Magic ... p. 18
- From a Seed Grew a Girl ... p. 143
- Valara and the Magic Eater ... p. 63
- Neshnaj, the Gentle Grey Giant ... p. 131

Love

These stories show that love is not bound by the human heart alone.

- Night Light ... p. 115
- Melody Song ... p. 161
- A Rightful Queen ... p. 33
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- The Sisters from the Stars ... p. 45
- Unicorn of the Sea and Me ... p. 187
- Neshnaj, the Gentle Grey Giant ... p. 131

Bullying

These stories involve characters conquering the bullies in their lives.

- Night Light ... p. 115
- My Story, the Wolf ... p. 96
- Can't Stop the Princess ... p. 81
- The Sisters from the Stars ... p. 45
- Unicorn of the Sea and Me ... p. 187
- Neshnaj, the Gentle Grey Giant ... p. 131

Race

These stories address and explore racial injustice.

- Neshnaj, the Gentle Grey Giant ... p. 131
- My Story, the Wolf ... p. 96
- Melody Song ... p. 161

Disability

These stories involve characters experiencing disability in one form or another.

- Night Light ... p. 115
- Melody Song ... p. 161

Death & Grief

This story involves a character exploring and surviving intense grief that follows after the death of a loved one.

Melody Song and
the Hymns of the Infinite Sadness ... p. 161

A Final Word from the Editors

Amy's Acknowledgements

Working on *99% Chance of Magic* has been one of the most complicated, difficult journeys of my life thus far. When Abbey and I set out to make this book, we had no idea that this small, simple idea would blossom into such an expansive, beautiful tapestry of love and hope. Selfishly, I only wanted my children and my children's children to have stories about trans girls and non-binary kids bravely exploring the Universe—stories that went far beyond wearing dresses and putting on makeup. Not that there's anything wrong with either of those things (I love dresses, for the record); *it's just that we, as (C)AMAB trans and non-binary people, are so much more than the armor we choose to wear in this world.*

There are so many people that I need to recognize for holding my heart during the past twenty-three months: my sister Vali for always believing in my goodness, my dearest friends Angela and Tim for protecting me endlessly, my pal in liberation Jennifer Cariaso for keeping me brave, my big brother Michael Vaughn for his tireless late-night encouragements, and fellow sisterhearts Julia Tasuil, Heather Dunn, and Kiersten Engquist for loving me in the real way. I also want to thank Gwen, Lee, Lawrence, Cam, Pond, Emily, AR, Joss, and Katie for constantly showing up for me, especially when my life was on the brink of collapse. This work also could not

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Secondly, I want to thank my co-editor, Abbey, for all of her heart that she put into this little book. When my dad suddenly passed away and I found myself drowning in the Seas of Griefland, she was the super glue that single-handedly kept *99% Chance of Magic* together. Abbey, this book would literally not exist without you. You made our dreams come true.

I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to my dearest Laurel. Your guidance, dedication, and love became the backbone of this work, and it shows on every page of this collection. You kept the magic alive when everything was falling apart. You are why I am still here. I love you so, so much. Thank you for being the harmony to my heart's song.

Lastly, I want to thank my father, Michael. I owe everything to you, Ben. You always believed in me, even when nobody else would. You saw my light from the second I slid into this strange world, then protected it fiercely for every single minute of my life. Everything that I am and everything that I do is because of you. I miss you hard, Papa, but I know your love is still flowing deep within my lifestream. *Until we meet again across time and space, everything is fine, and will be fine, in the garden of the Great Beyond.*

Abbey's Acknowledgements

It makes sense looking back at my own history that 99% *Chance of Magic* came about. My own transition was connected to books like *Nevada* and *I've Got a Time Bomb*. Reading those stories, I was shown how telling stories by girls like us is liberation work. I want to thank all the trans folks who've shown me the way. I hope this book shows others that same path.

My heart goes out to Tom, who was very right to assume two trans women writing children's stories would hit it off. Thank you for your guidance and your love. I hope I made you proud.

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And what is the Earth without the Moon? What would be my life without Misha's support? Thank you, Misha, for being one of my best friends. Thank you for giving my world a Moon to light my dark nights.

Amy. Misha. You are both part of the sky that makes me trans and I love you both for it.

To all the trans humans and non-humans who made this book possible, you are the stars that make up this night's sky. Bright and fiercely burning with love.

To the stars, may all future readers find beauty in you like I do.

You are safe. You are good. You are loved. Always.



Twelve spells.
Twenty-one artists.
A whole lot of magic.



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